The Cloud of Unknowing And Other Works

Translated with an Introduction and Notes by A. C. SPEARING

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England
Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11, Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Private Bag 102902, NSMC, Auckland, New Zealand
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 5 Watkins Street, Denver Ext 4, Johannesburg 2094, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

This translation first published 2001
9

Copy right © A. C. Spearing, 2001
All rights reserved

The moral right of the translator has been asserted

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject
to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,
re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's
prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in
which it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

EISBN: 9781101490471

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

FURTHER READING

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The Mystical Theology of St Denis

The Cloud of Unknowing

The Book of Privy Counselling

An Epistle on Prayer

NOTES

APPENDIX Middle English text of *The Mystical Theology of Saint Denis*, chapter 2

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In translating and annotating the texts, I have benefited greatly by consulting Phyllis Hodgson's notes to her 1982 edition of *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises on Contemplative Prayer* (Exeter: Catholic Records Press), together with *The Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. James Walsh (Mahwah, New Jersey, 1981), *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Other Works by the Author of the Cloud of Unknowing*, trans. James Walsh (Mahwah, New Jersey, 1988), and John P. H. Clark, *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction*, 3 vols. (Salzburg, 1995–6). Parts of the introduction derive from papers given at the 34th International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in 1999 and the 35th Congress in 2000, and from a lecture given to the English Department of the University of Copenhagen in 1999. I am grateful to the organizers of these occasions and to the audiences for their many helpful suggestions. I am especially grateful to the participants in my seminar, ENMD 481A, at the University of Virginia in the fall semester of 1999 for allowing me to try out on them a draft of the translation of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and for making numerous helpful comments on it. And I am indebted to Barbara Nolan for valuable suggestions and to Cristina Cervone for commenting on portions of the translation with minute care. Finally, it gives me pleasure to record that Phyllis Hodgson was the teacher of Elizabeth Salter, who was my teacher and who turned me into a medievalist and first introduced me to the writings translated here.

INTRODUCTION

The Cloud of Unknowing, with its evocative title, is the best known of a group of seven religious writings in English prose that date from the last quarter of the fourteenth century. Most of them circulated quite widely in the late Middle Ages, and since their rediscovery in the nineteenth century they have gained a new readership for their unwavering focus on God's radical transcendence of human understanding and human language, and for the brilliant originality with which they force their own language to point towards what lies beyond its scope. The seven consist of four original guides to the contemplative life – the *Cloud*, *The Book of Privy Counselling*, *An Epistle on Prayer*, and *An Epistle of Discretion of Stirrings* (that is, on discrimination of spiritual impulses) – and three adaptations of other writings – *Deonise Hid Divinité* (*The Mystical Theology of St Denis*) adapted from Pseudo-Dionysius, *Benjamin Minor* (also known as *The Study of Wisdom*) adapted from Richard of St Victor, and *A Treatise of Discerning of Spirits*, adapted from two sermons by St Bernard. The present volume begins with a translation of *Deonise Hid Divinité*, the author's version of the fundamental source text for the tradition of negative theology in which he was working – theology, that is, based on the assumption that it is impossible to make true affirmative statements about God in human language. There follows the *Cloud* itself, his major achievement and his longest separate piece of writing. This is succeeded by *Privy Counselling*, which is in many ways a substantial supplement to the *Cloud*. Of the other four texts, I have chosen to include the *Epistle on Prayer*, a relatively minor work, but one which is more original than *Benjamin Minor*, and more likely to be of interest to modern readers than the somewhat technical *Discretion of Stirrings* and *Discerning of Spirits*.

Similarities and cross-references among all seven works and their coexistence in certain manuscripts[1] enable us to attribute them with some certainty to the same author, but he guarded his anonymity with care. He was at one time thought to be the famous devotional writer Walter Hilton, but it is now generally agreed that the two are not the same, though each responded to and influenced the other in successive works.[2] The fatherly blessings at the end of the *Cloud* and the *Epistle on Prayer* indicate that the *Cloud* author was a priest (and therefore male). He was clearly a man of both general and theological learning, and may have been a monk, possibly a Carthusian, an order that specialized in mystical theology and was admired for its austerity at a time when monasticism in general was often thought to be in decline. The dialect of his writing indicates that, like Hilton, he came from somewhere in the East Midlands. Beyond this there is little point in speculating about his identity or personality, and in what follows I shall first place his work in the general context of medieval religious devotion and then discuss some of the distinctive features of the texts translated in this volume.

Medieval Religious Devotion

The subject of the *Cloud* and the texts associated with it is 'contemplation', a term that has a very specific meaning in medieval religious thought. It means the activity whose goal is the union of the soul with God in this life; hence the opening rubric of the *Cloud* itself: 'Here begins a book of contemplation called the *Cloud of Unknowing,* in which a soul is made one with God.' That union is understood to be the highest and most desirable experience of which human beings are capable. Before the Fall, the first human beings enjoyed it at will: 'this is the work in which humanity would have continued if we had never sinned, and it is the work for which we

were made and everything was made for us to help and further us in it' (*Cloud*, chapter 4). After death, those who are saved will once more be 'made one with God', enjoying the Beatific Vision, that experience of 'seeing God' which is the supreme reward of the blessed. While living on earth, as a result of sin, we are cut off from the continuous union with God 'for which we were made', but it is possible, by total dedication to the contemplative discipline, to be united with God at least for brief, unpredictable moments, and this experience is so precious that, for those who have the spiritual capacity, it is worth devoting their lives to achieving it. 'Contemplative', then, has two associated but distinct meanings: it refers to the spiritual discipline and the experience that is its goal (sometimes known, more loosely, as mystical experience), but it also refers to the outward way of life, cut off from the material world, usually as a monk or nun, hermit or anchorite, that enables complete dedication to that discipline. One reason for thinking that the author and the younger disciple he addresses in the three original works translated here may have been Carthusians is that this monastic order was strictly devoted to contemplation in the context of self-denial and renunciation of the world. The prologue to the *Cloud* distinguishes between actives and contemplatives, but also acknowledges that it is possible for those whose 'outward manner of existence belongs to the active life' to be inwardly dedicated, at least at times, to contemplation. The author's aim, here and in his other writings, is to teach the contemplative discipline to those rare persons who are 'secretly stirred by the Spirit of God… towards the highest level of contemplative activity' (*Cloud*, prologue). He never reveals explicitly whether he has reached this point himself, or whether he is like a coach whose task is to train spiritual athletes to achieve what is beyond his own powers; but it seems implicit in his writing[3] that he has some personal experience of contemplation.

In our time Christianity generally emphasizes practical charity and personal consolation as its goals. In the Middle Ages, too, these were highly valued, and the relationship between these and the spiritual aspirations that can seem to be of no benefit to others was often

expounded in terms of the contrast between Martha and Mary, as it is in chapters 16–23 of the *Cloud*. In the author's interpretation of Luke 10:38–42, Mary Magdalene, the repentant sinner, sits at Christ's feet totally absorbed in 'the supreme wisdom of his Godhead', while her sister Martha, 'busying herself about the preparation of his food', complains to Christ, asking him 'to tell her sister to get up and help her' in her practical work for his benefit (chapter 17). Christ answers her, as Luke puts it: 'Martha, Martha, thou art careful and art troubled about many things; but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her' (Luke 10:41–42). In the course of his minute exposition of this incident as concerning the relationship between action and contemplation, the *Cloud* author makes clear that medieval contemplatives too must expect to be criticized by those who do not understand the value of their desire to 'set themselves apart from worldly concerns and aim to be God's special servants in holiness and righteousness of spirit' (chapter 19). He argues elsewhere that, in the mysterious economy of the spirit, this apparently selfish absorption is in fact 'helpful to all your friends, in body and spirit, living and dead' (chapter 9). 'All people living on earth are marvellously helped by this work, in ways you do not know. Yes, the very souls in purgatory are relieved of their pain by the power of this work' (chapter 3). The desire to participate in this strenuous spiritual 'work' became more widespread in the later Middle Ages; and whereas contemplation had earlier been thought possible only for those living in total seclusion from worldly concerns, by the fourteenth century it was increasingly felt to be a possibility for those whose lives were outwardly active. Readership of the *Cloud* author's works (and especially perhaps of the *Cloud* itself, surviving as it does in at least eighteen manuscripts) would not necessarily have been confined to monks and nuns.

We can recognize in medieval Christianity a gradual movement towards more personal and passionate kinds of religious devotion, generally focused on the Incarnation – on Jesus Christ as the object of human love. The conception of Christ as a warrior, the means by

which God fought and defeated the Devil and thus released human souls from his tyranny, which was dominant in earlier religious writings, was never forgotten, but from the eleventh century onwards that conception began to be outshone by one of Christ as a wounded and suffering man, sent by his Father to arouse compassionate love in his fellow human beings and thus to draw them back to God. This theological idea was formulated, for example, by Peter Abelard (1079–1142) when he wrote: 'We are justified in the blood of Christ and reconciled to God because, by… receiving our nature and persisting in it until death, and teaching us by word and example, He bound us to Him more firmly by love.'[4] In his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) gave fuller and more intense expression to this notion of mutual love as the bond between Christ and the individual soul. From the twelfth century it became a central theme of devotional writings, first in Latin and then in the vernacular languages, where it appealed to pious laypeople who did not know Latin and who did not necessarily have a sophisticated understanding of theology. In English, we find writings such as the early thirteenth-century *Wooing of Our Lord*, where the language of romantic love, often borrowed from the erotic poetry of the *Song of Songs*, is employed in prose enhanced by alliteration, strongly marked rhythm and insistent repetition, with the aim of producing a crisis of religious emotion in the female users for whom it was intended. The *Wooing* has at its centre a vision of Christ scourged, buffeted and humiliated, perceived as imaginatively present to a loving reader unable to escape from the horror of his sufferings:

> Ah, what shall I do now? Now my heart may break apart, my eyes are flowing with water. Ah, now my sweetheart is sentenced to die. Ah, now he is led forth to the place of execution on Mount Calvary. Ah, see, he is carrying his cross on his bare shoulders.… Ah, now, sweet Jesus, they still add shame and mockery to all your misery, laughing you to scorn where you hang on the cross. My darling love, where you hung with outstretched arms on the cross, you were pity to the righteous, laughter to the wicked…[5]

For men as well as women, emotionally charged meditations of this kind on Christ's human life and sufferings, with the Passion as their magnetic centre, formed the main stream of personal religious devotion in the later Middle Ages. In England, it was in the fourteenth century that major works of religious literature began to be written in vernacular prose, in part probably as a consequence of the general spread of literacy and of the growing effectiveness of the Church's mission to spread religious feeling, beyond mere outward conformity, among the laity. People who could read wanted books in their own language that would provide guidance and inspiration for their moral and spiritual lives, and some were excited by the promise that even in this life they could hope to regain the oneness with God broken by the Fall. The first of the major writers who responded to this demand, and who collectively are sometimes known as the 'Middle English mystics', was Richard Rolle, a hermit but not a priest, who wrote passionately lyrical meditations and treatises in both Latin and English. He died in 1349, the year of the Black Death, but writings by or attributed to him continued to be read over the next century and more – indeed, they seem to have become the most widely read writings in English. Rolle composed intensely bodily meditations on the Passion, and he wrote of his experience of God in richly sensory terms, as a matter of music, light, sweetness, fire – the fire of love burning in the soul 'as you may feel your finger burn if you put it in the fire'.[6] (The *Cloud* author, as we shall see, warns against this bodily understanding of spiritual matters, which he saw as dangerously influential.)

Later in the century came Walter Hilton (died 1396), an Augustinian canon and author of numerous devotional works, the most famous of which is *The Scale of Perfection*, a comprehensive guide to the life of the soul, from moral reform up to contemplation itself. The *Scale* was written in two successive parts, the first for an anchoress, the second apparently for a wider audience. Like the *Cloud* author, Hilton warns against the mere bodiliness into which Rolle's mysticism could easily degenerate, insisting that a true desire for Jesus in the heart is of greater value than 'visions or revelations

of angels appearing, songs and sounds, savours and smells, burnings and any pleasing bodily feeling'.[7] On the other hand, Hilton writes repeatedly of the Incarnation, and willingly accepts earthly language and bodily analogies as capable of revealing divine truth. In his resistance to extremes, his richly metaphorical language, and the balance and moderation of his prose, he often seems a forerunner of the great Anglican divines of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such as Richard Hooker or Lancelot Andrewes.

Another late-fourteenth-century writer is the anchorite Julian of Norwich (*c.* 1342–after 1416), the first woman known to have written a book in English. Unlike Hilton or the *Cloud* author, she acknowledges from the beginning that she is writing about experiences of her own. In 1373, when very ill and apparently about to die, she had a series of extraordinary 'showings' or revelations, which she believed came to her directly from God. They began with a vision of the dying Christ, on whose face drops of blood seemed to be running down from the crown of thorns, and proceeded to include other sights and messages in both verbal and non-verbal form. She recovered, and spent many years meditating on these experiences, of which she wrote two accounts. The first, short version is mainly about the experiences themselves; the second, written considerably later, and stimulated by further messages from God, is much longer and moves from vision to a subtle and original theology. Julian deliberately rejected, as a kind of temptation, the urge to turn her attention from Jesus on the cross to 'his Father in heaven…. Thus was I taught to choose Jesus as my heaven, though at that time I saw him only in pain'.[8] She developed a conception of God as our mother as well as our father, and came to the very verge of denying the existence of hell, because she saw no anger in God and was told by him that at the Last Day he would perform a great deed that, it seemed, would bring about universal salvation. Later still comes another female writer, Margery Kempe (*c.* 1373–*c.* 1440), a married laywoman, whose union with God was again of a more bodily kind – indeed, Jesus once told her, 'I must be intimate

with you, and lie in your bed with you… and you may boldly, when you are in bed, take me to you as your wedded husband'.[9] Margery wandered about England and the continent, sometimes giving way to uncontrollable weeping and screaming, always seemingly obsessed with the 'wonder' her behaviour aroused in others. Though illiterate, she persuaded others to write her spiritual autobiography, the first autobiography in English. Views differ as to the authenticity of her religious experiences; but then, except for those prepared to accept a dogmatic theological judgement, 'authenticity' in devotional writing will be a literary effect, always open to question.

One other religious prose writer of this period must be mentioned: Nicholas Love (died 1424), a Carthusian prior, whose *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* was a translation of a Latin work once attributed to St Bonaventure, but probably by the Franciscan Johannes de Caulibus. The *Mirror,* an extended series of meditations on Christ's human life, was endorsed by the Church as a bastion against the Lollard translation of the Bible into English and the heretical views that were springing up in consequence of individual readings of Scripture unguided by the Church's teaching. The great age of devotional writing in England was also the great age of heresy. England had been largely free of the heresies that had arisen in earlier centuries on the continent, but the Oxford theologian John Wyclif (*c.* 1330–84) was the source of a group of heterodox views that included questioning the doctrine of transubstantiation and the use of images of saints in worship, views which have been seen as amounting to a 'premature Reformation'.[10] His followers, known as Lollards, gained considerable support, and were regarded by the institutional Church, and by the Lancastrian dynasty that seized the throne in 1399, as a danger that must be resisted at all costs. Love's *Mirror* was intended to provide spiritual nourishment, with no encouragement to theological speculation, to the laity, envisaged as 'simple creatures who, like children, need to be fed with the milk of light doctrine, not with the serious food of great learning and of high contemplation', and for whom 'contemplation of the Humanity

of Christ is more pleasing, more beneficial, *and safer* than high contemplation of the Godhead'.[11]

The Cloud *Author and the* Via Negativa

Where, then, does the *Cloud* author stand in relation to this powerful tradition of devotional writings that focus so intensely on Christ's Passion and his Humanity, and often on bodily aspects of religious experience? He draws on a radically different tradition, one that is in many ways opposed to the main stream of medieval English devotion. This tradition is that of the *via negativa* (way of negation), and it focuses not on God's human nature but on his divine nature, seen as totally transcendent, totally beyond the reach of human understanding and human language. The *via negativa* goes back further than the tradition of meditation on Christ's Humanity, to a writer of around AD 500, known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. He has that cumbrous title because his writings were mistakenly attributed to the Dionysius mentioned briefly in the Acts of the Apostles (17:34) as being converted from paganism to Christianity by St Paul. This Dionysius was also confused with St Dionysius of Paris, who lived in the third century AD and was one of those who converted Gaul to Christianity; he is the patron saint of France, and is better known as St Denis. So three historical Dionysiuses became one, the author of an important group of writings that merge Neoplatonism with Christianity. The original writings of this 'Pseudo-Dionysius' are in Greek, but in the Middle Ages they were known in Western Europe only through Latin adaptations. Their fundamental idea is that human beings are capable of achieving union with God in this life, but only through a process of deification which involves 'unknowing' – leaving behind all perceptions of the senses and reasonings of the intellect, and entering into a darkness in which they must wait to be illuminated

by flashes of divine light. This idea is stated succinctly in a sentence quoted in chapter 70 of *The Cloud of Unknowing*: 'The godliest knowledge of God is that which is known through ignorance.' The Latin adaptations known in the West gave a new twist to the meaning of the Dionysian originals, and brought them closer to the dominant tradition of Christocentric devotion, by placing a far stronger emphasis on love as the bridge between the soul and God. As was noted above, the *Cloud* author's works include a complete translation (or rather, a further adaptation) of one of these Dionysian texts, the *De mystica theologia*, supposedly addressed by Dionysius to St Paul's disciple and 'fellow labourer' Timothy.[12] The English author knew this work through the Latin commentaries and paraphrases of Thomas Gallus (died 1246), the abbot of the house of Victorine canons at Vercelli, to whom he refers in the prologue of the *Mystical Theology* as 'the Abbot of St Victor'. As one modern scholar has put it, 'For the *Cloud* author as for Gallus, love is the highest cognitive power, far superior to the powers of reason and intellect.'[13] The English author explains early in the *Cloud* (chapter 4) that, whereas God is 'forever beyond the reach' of the intellectual faculty, the soul's loving faculty enables each human being to

> embrace within itself him who is fully sufficient (and beyond comparison more than fully) to fill all the souls and angels that can ever exist. And this is the unending marvellous miracle of love, which will never be concluded; for God will always do it, and will never cease from doing it.

Though the *Mystical Theology* was written later than the *Cloud*, it stands first in this volume as a brief and often startling exposition of the negative theology that is the basis of all the English author's writings. I would call attention especially to its final chapter, where the author gives a comprehensive list of the things we *cannot* say about God. The gap between God and human language is such that we cannot truly say that God lives or that he is good or father or son or spirit or that he exists or that he does not exist (language will no more express atheism than it will express belief); we cannot even

say that he is God; there is no way whatever that we can know him, nor does he know any of the things that exist as they are in themselves. There is an absolute fissure between God and everything human. It may be hard to see how such beliefs could be compatible with Christianity itself, and especially with its central doctrine of the Incarnation: if God became man, taking on human language as well as human flesh, how can this absolute gap and this absolute incapacity of human language exist? Scholars have debated whether the *Cloud* author's metaphysical outlook might be closer to that of Buddhism than to that of Christianity.[14] The emphasis elsewhere in his work on love as the means of bridging this gap probably sets him apart from Buddhism, but we can perhaps suppose that if he had happened to be born into a different culture, he would have had no difficulty in being a Buddhist. The *Mystical Theology* is the most extreme of his statements of the consequences of the *via negativa*, and it may be significant that this translation survives in only two manuscripts, both of which are collections of all seven of his works. It may perhaps have been felt to be too dangerous to circulate separately. Even the *Cloud*, after all, begins with a prologue insisting that the work may be misunderstood if not carefully read as a whole, and should not be made known to any but those truly dedicated to contemplation – though it must be admitted that one effect of the prologue might have been to arouse just the curiosity it deplores, and to attract readers to the work as if it were a dangerous drug.

In his own works, the *Cloud* author frequently takes up questions relating to what Nicholas Love calls 'contemplation of the Humanity of Christ'. He sees this as a desirable and necessary religious exercise, but one that belongs to a relatively early stage in the soul's ascent to God. In the *Cloud*, for example, he warns of the danger for the advanced mystic of meditation on the Passion, as a hindrance to union with God. A thought may rise up in your mind, and

> perhaps it will bring to your mind various beautiful and wonderful instances of God's kindness, and say that he is very sweet and loving, very gracious and merciful. And if you

are willing to listen, it desires nothing better; for it will chatter more and more till at last it brings you lower, to remembrance of his Passion. And there it will let you see the wonderful kindness of God; and if you listen, it seeks nothing better. For soon after this it will let you see your old sinful way of life; and perhaps, as you see this and think about it, it will bring to mind some place where you used to live in the past. So that in the end, before you know it, you will be scattered, you do not know where. The cause of this scattering is that you first listened willingly to the thought, answered it, accepted it and let it work freely (chapter 7).

All the 'Middle English mystics', however strong their emphasis on God's bodily suffering and however bodily the language in which they refer to their religious experiences, would have agreed that ultimately the human senses and human language are insufficient to convey the true nature of union with God. Even Rolle, in his Latin *Incendium amoris*, writes at one point of what he calls a 'shout' given by the 'inner voice' as it 'sings' to God, and then breaks off in despair, saying, 'But here I have to "give up" because of my inherent stupidity and dullness; I have not the wit to describe this shout or its magnitude, or even the pleasure it gives just to think of it, or feel it, or experience it. Neither now nor in the future will I be able to tell you, because I do not know how to overcome the limitations of my senses…'[15] Even Julian, writing as she often does about divine messages she herself has received through the senses, insists that their meaning is not really sensory; thus, when she tells of the Son sitting on the right hand of the Father, she is careful to explain that 'This does not mean that the Son sits on the Father's right hand, side by side with him, as one person sits by another in this world; for as I see it there is no such sitting in the Trinity.'[16] We must not exaggerate, then, the difference between the *Cloud* author and the other English devotional writers: they are aware of the limits of human language in regard to God, while he shares their focus on love, accepts the orthodox view that salvation can be achieved 'by sole virtue of Christ's Passion' (*Cloud*, chapter 25), and does not deny that meditation on the Passion, your own sins, or the joys of heaven 'will bring you much good, much help, much benefit, and

much grace' (chapter 12). But there are major differences in emphasis between his writings and theirs. For him such meditations can only be a necessary stage in the approach to God. He evidently feels a strong revulsion towards what he regards as the excesses of material devotion encouraged by writings such as those of Rolle, and is sometimes impelled by that revulsion to approach the opposite extreme, the denial of value to anything bodily. He was not accused of heresy, but at times you can feel him struggling to hold on to orthodoxy.

Doctrine and History

The *Cloud* author appears in his writings as a spiritual director instructing a novice, the disciple described in the *Cloud* as aged twenty-four (chapter 4); he is in authority over the pupil, and what he is teaching him is absolute truth.[17] The teacher is extremely careful to avoid arrogance, repeatedly using phrases such as 'to my humble ability', turning his texts into dramatic dialogues that incorporate objections attributed to the disciple, and ending the *Epistle on Prayer*, for example, by urging the disciple to follow a different method if he learns one that is better, and begging for his prayers, 'because I am a sinner, and you do not know how things are with me'. He is also extremely careful to insist that the pursuit of contemplation can be no substitute for the everyday requirements of medieval Catholicism, but can begin only after one has achieved 'faithful reformation through contrition and confession and satisfaction according to the established practices and laws of the universal Church' (*Cloud*, chapter 15). But he would surely permit no questioning of the equally universal truth of what these treatises teach. God in his absolute transcendence exists, can be reached, and wants to be reached. The difficulties on the way are almost insuperable: you must 'Lift up your heart towards God with a

humble stirring of love', but when you do that you will find between you and him 'only a darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing, you do not know what'. This is inevitable, given that God is utterly transcendent and therefore unknowable, and your only hope is to 'remain in this darkness as long as you can' (chapter 3), and 'beat on that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love, and do not give up, whatever happens' (chapter 6). Further, you must 'put a cloud of forgetting beneath you, between you and everything that was ever created' (chapter 5). The apprentice to the 'work' of contemplation, then, is in one sense in a state of total obscurity between these two clouds, unable to rely on his senses or his intellect as guides, and finding indeed that they are bound to distract and mislead him; but love will not mislead him. 'Love Jesus… and all that he has is yours' (*Cloud*, chapter 4). 'For he can well be loved, but he cannot be thought. By love he can be grasped and held, but by thought neither grasped nor held' (chapter 6). 'For love may reach God in this life, but knowledge may not' (chapter 8). Love is an activity of the individual will,[18] aided by divine grace, and in that sense it cannot be taught, but that is not to say that contemplation is a matter of individual inspiration. One definition of 'mysticism' is '(Religious) belief characterized by self-delusion or dreamy confusion of thought',[19] but that is far from the way the *Cloud* author conceives and presents his subject matter. For him, contemplation is a craft that can be taught; its goal is objectively real, and, though it lies beyond thought, the means to achieve it is part of a complete and authoritative intellectual system – that of theology, understood, as it was in the Middle Ages, as a science, indeed the highest of the sciences.

That system includes beliefs that might not be shared by many modern Christians or, if shared, might not be understood as part of a coherent intellectual system. The author refers several times, for example, to the Devil as an objective source of deception, 'For I tell you truly that the Devil has his contemplatives, just as God has his.' (*Cloud*, chapter 45) Even God's contemplatives 'will certainly see and feel, or else smell, taste or hear some cause for confusion made

by the fiend' in their senses (*Privy Counselling*, chapter 5). Later in the *Cloud* the author goes into more detail about the Devil's methods, learned from 'students of necromancy who possess the knowledge to summon up wicked spirits'. When the Devil 'appears in bodily form he reveals in some characteristic of his body what his servants are in spirit', but whatever his 'bodily likeness', 'he always has only one nostril, and that a large, wide one', through which the fire of hell can be seen (chapter 55). This grotesque detail is then interpreted as having a symbolic significance, but it is clearly understood to be, in itself, not the product of 'dreamy confusion of thought' but an objective reality revealed by dangerous scientific experiment. The general grounding of the author's contemplative teaching in the science of his age emerges especially strongly in the treatment of time in chapter 4 of the *Cloud.* The 'stirring' in the will by which the contemplative can make contact with God, though in one sense mysterious, is in another precisely definable. It is described as being 'neither longer nor shorter than an instant', and an instant is a term that has a meaning 'defined by expert scientists in the field of astronomy' as the smallest possible unit of time, equivalent to fifteen ninety-fourths of a second. Mystical theology, then, is envisaged by the *Cloud* author as part of a single system with natural philosophy, and for him infinity and transcendence are also mathematical concepts.

The author's claim is to be the vehicle of a coherent doctrine of absolute validity focused on an absolutely transcendent God, and this implies the further claim to transcendence of history. If this claim is accepted, not only will what he teaches need to be seen as being as true now as it was when he wrote it, but his writings will have to be read as forming a totally self-consistent body of work. That is the view taken by many of the modern scholars, often themselves Catholics, to whom we are most indebted for interpreting his writings. One of them writes:

A most important aspect of the *Cloud* corpus that has never been given sufficient attention by its students is the doctrinal cohesiveness, internal and external alike, of its various

treatises, and with this the traditional nature of the spirituality it teaches. This coherent body of doctrine is what Dom Cuthbert Butler, in his account of the teachings of Sts Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Bernard of Clairvaux on contemplation and the contemplative life, has called 'Western Mysticism'.[20]

This is the statement of a believing theologian, to whom it comes naturally to stress the perfect coherence of the *Cloud* author's work and what it has in common with earlier Catholic teaching on contemplation. The author certainly claims (for instance at the end of chapter 7 of *Privy Counselling*) that his work is self-consistent and consistent with Dionysian teaching, and he doubtless believed this to be true, but we are not obliged to accept his own view of himself. In one respect at least the *Cloud* corpus does not appear to be doctrinally cohesive, since *Mystical Theology* (chapter 5) denies that even existence can be attributed to God, while *Privy Counselling* (chapter 4) recommends 'blind and loving contemplation of the word IS' as the means of approaching 'him who is as he is, him who alone is of himself his own blessed being and yours'. There may well be a refined metaphysical distinction here between two senses of 'exists' or 'is', but the force of the two passages for vernacular readers would surely be contradictory. The orthodox theological approach to these writings has its own validity, but it should be recognized that it may exclude aspects of the author's work that will be of special interest to many readers of a modern translation. These include: the significant differences of emphasis among his various writings; his dynamic responses to earlier and contemporary mystical texts; the ways in which he seems to respond to the reception of the *Cloud* itself (partly with anger at what he sees as misunderstanding, and partly by attempting to correct what has led to misunderstanding); the possibility of speculative and experimental elements in his thought about God and the soul; and, above all, the work's existence not only as purportedly timeless doctrine but *as writing* in the vernacular language of a particular time and place. In short, the danger of this approach is that it makes the author a much less interesting writer, and one whose crucial

relationship is to an established body of truth that no ordinary reader is in a position to test or question, rather than to a specific historical situation in which 'truth' was, as always, in the process of being constructed. And for most modern readers, the question whether the author was in perfect conformity with the Church's traditional teaching is likely to be less important than what he can do to project their imaginations towards the unimaginable.

As we have seen, in England the fourteenth century was an age of religious controversy as well as one of devotional writing, and the *Cloud* author's work inevitably participates in that controversy, one concern of which was with the legitimacy of any writing in the vernacular that touched on theological issues. Thus 'the very act of writing in the vernacular had theological implications'.[21] At several points in the *Cloud* he refers (though never by name) to other devotional writers. In chapters 35 and 48 he commends the teachings of 'someone else' who is likely to have been Hilton, while in chapter 68 he politely indicates reservations about that someone's emphasis on inwardness. In chapter 45 he harshly attacks the errors encouraged by the writings of Rolle and his followers, which lead 'young disciples' to identify 'the bodily inflaming of their constitution' with 'the fire of love' (perhaps alluding to Rolle's *Incendium amoris*). In other chapters he appears to be warning against the excesses of continental mystics whose work was just beginning to become influential in England: in chapter 12, extreme practices of bodily self-mortification even to the point of self-castration; in chapter 50, the violent weeping practised by Mary of Oignies and other continental women and later by Margery Kempe;[22] and in chapter 44, the danger of allowing the intense sorrow that he sees as inseparable from awareness of one's own separate existence to lead to a desire for self-annihilation. Such a desire would be 'diabolical madness and contempt for God'; and here he may be alluding to the heretical teaching of the French mystic Marguerite Porete, which became available in English about this time.[23] In instances such as these, we can certainly see a concern for orthodoxy, but in a situation where orthodoxy involved

not a simple conformity to transhistorical truth but a dynamic process of discussion and negotiation.

There is a similar dynamic relation among the *Cloud* author's individual writings, most obviously between the *Cloud* and *Privy Counselling*. Near the end of the *Cloud* the author tells his disciple that if there is any of its subject matter that he 'would like to have more fully expounded, let me know what it is and your ideas about it, and I will improve it if I can, to my humble ability' (chapter 74). *Privy Counselling* fulfils this promise, yet not merely as a fuller exposition of the earlier work, but in ways involving important shifts of emphasis and considerable emotional stress. This is especially noticeable in chapter 1, where metaphysical questions of being are newly introduced as a preliminary to the teaching that the contemplative should offer God the mere fact of his own existence; and this teaching is accompanied by angry resentment of alleged complaints by scholars that it is too difficult to be understood, and by the accusation that the complaints are themselves the product of wilful misunderstanding:

> Someone who cannot think and feel that he is – not what he is, but that he is – I consider excessively ignorant and simple. For it is manifestly given to the most ignorant cow or the beast most lacking in reason (supposing it could be said, as it cannot, that one was more ignorant or irrational than another) to be aware of its own existence.

The vehemence of the author's language seems to indicate that he is responding not just to a pupil's request for fuller explanation but to threatening criticism of a metaphysic only implied in the *Cloud* – criticism hinting, it may be, at some Porete-like heresy underlying his interpretation of the *via negativa*.

A different way in which *Privy Counselling* represents a shift in emphasis from the *Cloud* is in its stronger affirmation of the validity and indeed necessity of meditation on God's manhood. Having repeated in chapter 8 the *Cloud*'s rejection of the efficacy of 'subtle and ingenious imaginings and meditations' on 'your sinful way of life, the Passion of Christ, the joys of our Lady, or all the saints and

angels in heaven', he goes on in the next chapter to insist that, before attaining the higher levels of contemplation, one *must* engage in such meditations. 'Anyone who does not come in by this way does not come by the right way' – and he interprets Christ's 'I am the door' (John 10:9) as meaning,

> because I wish there to be a plain public way and an entrance open to all who wish to come in, so that no one may have the excuse of not knowing the way, I have clothed myself in ordinary human nature, and made myself so accessible that by my Manhood I am the door, and anyone who enters by me will be saved.

Later he reminds his reader that it is precisely the 'elaborate meditations and subtle imaginings of the attributes of your being and God's' that have led him to his 'present capacity for grace' (chapter 13). Thus the author attempts a more explicit reconciliation of the *via negativa* with the main stream of orthodox late-medieval devotion; and in *Privy Counselling* as a whole we can see him diverging from the *Cloud* in two opposite directions, towards such a reconciliation and towards an angry defence of a more radical metaphysic.

The *Cloud* author was writing in a period when Wyclif's views were first declared heretical (at the Blackfriars Council in 1382), and Lollardy was first being perceived as a danger to orthodoxy. His downgrading of the value of late-medieval Catholicism's focus on bodily practices and external ceremonies might have seemed to put him on the side of the Lollards. Thus he writes contemptuously of 'presumptuous young mystical disciples' who take the preposition 'up' in too literal a sense, imagine that God lives above the planetary spheres, and 'fashion a God as they please, and clothe him in rich clothes, and place him on a throne, far more elaborately than he has ever been painted on earth' (*Cloud*, chapter 57). A Lollard might well have written like this about his orthodox contemporaries, as fashioning a God as they pleased, yet the *Cloud* author is manifestly not writing as a Lollard. Late-medieval orthodoxy was richly concrete in belief and worship, focused on

things and bodies (statues, pictures, vestments, offerings, the real presence of Christ's body in the consecrated host), but at the elevated spiritual level with which the author was concerned, the material and the bodily had simply dropped below the horizon, and he had no wish to align himself with heresy. In the later chapters of the *Cloud* there are several references to 'heretics', which, in late-fourteenth-century England, could only mean Lollards. Chapter 53 includes heretics and their supporters in its vigorous satire of the grotesque behaviour of those deceived by 'false contemplation'. Chapter 56 elaborates on these supporters of heresy: their motive is that the heretics offer 'an easier path than that ordained by Holy Church', and they will ultimately be revealed not just as upholders of error but as 'proud lechers inwardly'. Here the author may be alluding to powerful patrons of Wyclif such as John of Gaunt, who 'lived in open sin with his daughters' governess, Katharine Swynford'[24] while defending Wyclif against his ecclesiastical opponents – largely, it would appear, because Wyclif favoured confiscation of the Church's wealth by the secular power. A further reference to heretics in chapter 58 has a more disturbing ambiguity. The author is arguing that all bodily revelations have spiritual meanings, but that we must not reject the bodily in favour of the spiritual,

> like the heretics, who are aptly compared to wild men whose custom it is, whenever they have drunk from a fine cup, to throw it against the wall and break it.… By… the cup… I mean the visible miracle, and all suitable bodily practices that are in accordance with the work of the spirit and do not hinder it. By… the drink I mean the spiritual significance of visible miracles… for people will kiss the cup because there is wine in it.

In terms of this analogy, Lollards could be seen as breaking the cup (that is, rejecting 'bodily practices'), but the further image of kissing the cup because there is wine in it complicates the issue by evoking the literal kissing of the chalice that holds the consecrated eucharistic wine, which, according to orthodox theology, does not just signify but literally *is* Christ's blood. The theology of the

eucharist was centrally at stake between orthodoxy and Lollardy, and one has the sense that the author may have been led into greater complexity than he intended by the 'marvellous fanciful images' (*Mystical Theology*, chapter 2) that he persistently sees as obscuring the naked truth of God. If so, it was a danger inseparable from the use of language itself.

Language as Theme and Practice

The *Cloud* author's downgrading of everything bodily is closely associated with the centrality of language as a theme of his work. Human language is for him a crucial barrier between the soul and God, and a crucial hindrance to his own attempt to write about contemplation. The chief reason for this is that language is bodily in origin, whereas God is transcendent: 'given that speech is a bodily activity performed by the tongue, a bodily organ, it must always be spoken in bodily words', and 'of the work that belongs to God alone I dare not take it upon me to speak with my blabbering fleshly tongue' (*Cloud*, chapters 61, 26). Language is a product of the *blabryng fleschely tonge* – a phrase that, when you speak it, makes your tongue feel so bodily that it is too big for your mouth – and therefore lacks the transparency that might enable it to represent what 'belongs to God alone'. Language is material in its reference, not just in the obvious concreteness of common nouns and adjectives, but even in prepositions. The author demonstrates explicitly that even prepositions do not apply literally to God. In the context of whether Christ literally went *up* into heaven and whether he is literally standing there in body as St Stephen saw him, he considers the phrase 'stand by':

> By 'standing' is understood readiness to help; and for this reason one comrade commonly says to another when in bodily battle, 'Keep going, friend, and fight hard, and don't give up the battle too easily, because I'll stand by you.' He does not just mean standing in a bodily sense, for perhaps the battle is on horse and not on foot, and perhaps it is moving and not

standing still; but when he says that he will stand by him he means that he will be ready to help him. (*Cloud*, chapter 58)

Heaven is as near in one direction as another, 'For the main road and shortest road to heaven is run by desires and not by footsteps' (chapter 60).

Take care, therefore, that you do not understand in a bodily sense what is meant spiritually, even though it is expressed in bodily words, such as UP or DOWN, IN or OUT, BEHIND or IN FRONT, ON ONE SIDE or ON THE OTHER SIDE. For however spiritual something may be in itself, yet if it is to be spoken about, given that speech is a bodily activity performed by the tongue, a bodily organ, it must always be spoken in bodily words. But does it follow that it must therefore be received and understood in a bodily sense? – no, but spiritually (chapter 61).

Given this irremediable bodiliness and metaphoricity of language, what is a writer about spiritual matters to do? Silence might seem the only option, in accordance with Wittgenstein's advice that 'what we cannot talk about we must consign to silence'.[25] But, silence not being an effective means of instruction, perhaps it would be best to use language as abstractly as possible, removing it as far as possible from the bodily, the sensory and the concrete. To do that in the *Cloud* author's time would have meant writing in Latin, the normal language of theology and other kinds of abstract thought. But, though Carthusian writers regularly used Latin, the *Cloud* author wrote in English. An obvious reason would be that he was writing to instruct a novice with little Latin, but that may not have been the only explanation, for the Harleian manuscript containing all seven works is heavily glossed in Latin. And whereas Latin, though often spoken, was essentially a written language, and thus distanced from the mouth and the tongue, English, like any vernacular language, was essentially spoken, and its written form was perceived as a representation of speech. It fell much more readily into speech-patterns than Latin did – question and answer, colloquial phrasing, familiar address, and so on. Did the *Cloud* author try then to make

his English as abstract and distant from the senses as possible? On the contrary.

Middle English religious prose characteristically made heavy use of rhythmic alliteration, a device that calls attention to the phonetic materiality of language. The *Cloud* author shows no sign of attempting to remove or reduce this; there are many strongly alliterative passages in his work. In translating I have tried to reproduce his alliterative patterns when possible, but I have not always succeeded, and this feature can best be recognized in the original. Here are a few examples: 'What weri wrechid herte and sleping in sleuthe is that, the which is not waknid with the drawght of this love and the voise of this cleping?' (*Cloud*, chapter 2)[26] Or (of Mary Magdalene) 'for whi al hir liif-tyme sche had hem with hir where-so sche yede, as it were in a birthen bounden togeders and leide up ful prively in the hole of hir herte' (*Cloud*, chapter 16).[27] Or (of false contemplatives) 'Trewly I trowe, bot yif thei have grace to leve of soche pipyng ypocrisie, that bitwix that priveé pride in theire hertes withinne and soche meek wordes withoutyn, the sely soule may ful sone sinke into sorow' (*Cloud*, chapter 54).[28] The phonetic texture of the *Cloud* and the other works keeps us constantly aware that language is indeed the product of the blabbering fleshly tongue.

More important, the *Cloud* author repeatedly chooses language that is concrete in reference, and evokes the very world of the body and the senses that it might be supposed he would do his best to exclude. This is natural enough, no doubt, when discussing sin, itself a hindrance to union with God. He urges the would-be contemplative to 'focus on sin as a lump, you do not know what, nothing other than yourself'. And the revolting notion of sin 'thus coagulated into a lump' (*Cloud*, chapter 36), shapeless yet irredeemably concrete, and inseparable from your very being, is frequently repeated in subsequent chapters, and even elaborated, as when he refers to 'this foul, stinking lump of sin, as it were united and coagulated into the substance of your being' (chapter 40). Perhaps too it is not surprising that the author should exploit rather

than minimize the concreteness of language when writing about false contemplatives, in a way that is intensely bodily precisely in order to make the point that they mistake the bodily for the spiritual. There are many examples of this, so many as to arouse the suspicion that he took more pleasure than he would have admitted in his satirical comedy at the expense of those deceived by false teachings:

Some people are so burdened with strange and foolish habits in their bodily conduct that when they hear something they twist their heads peculiarly to one side, and up go their chins. They let their mouths gape open, as if they could hear with them and not with their ears. Some, when about to speak, point with their fingers or at their fingers, or at their own chests, or the chests of those they are addressing. Some can neither sit still, stand still, nor lie still, without either waggling their feet or else doing something with their hands. Some row with their arms as they are speaking, as if they needed to swim over a great stretch of water. Some are always smiling and laughing at every word they speak, as if they were flirtatious girls or silly juggling jesters in search of attention. (*Cloud*, chapter 53)

But it is not only to refer to sin and error that the *Cloud* author heightens the concreteness of his language. He does the same when evoking those very movements of God and the soul that he repeatedly insists are *not* concrete. In the first chapter of the *Cloud* he reminds his disciple of how God first summoned him – 'And so in his grace he kindled your desire, and fastened to it a leash of longing' – and assures him that 'you can learn to lift up the foot of your love and step towards the state and level of life that is perfect'. Later (chapter 4) he urges him to notice how contemplation begins, 'For, truly understood, it is just a sudden and as it were unforeseen stirring, springing swiftly to God like a spark from a coal.' That word *stirring*, along with other forms of the verb *stir*, is very frequently repeated throughout the work to refer to a spiritual impulse or movement. The author comments on this himself:

Know well that those who apply themselves to the work of contemplation… even if they read 'lift up' or 'go in', and even though the work may be described here as 'stirring', need to take very careful note that this 'stirring' does not involve reaching in a bodily sense

either up or in, and is not any such stirring as from one place to another…. For the perfection of this contemplative work is so pure and spiritual in nature that, if it is well and truly understood, it must be regarded as far removed from any stirring and from any place (chapter 59).

When translating I was often tempted to replace the Middle English *steryng* with the Latinate and more abstract 'impulse', but to do so would lose just the concreteness that the author warns against yet keeps on evoking. Another word frequently repeated in the original is *put*, usually translated here as 'push' or 'thrust'. The disciple is warned to let the initiative come from God:

He only wants you to watch him and let him alone; and guard the windows and door against flies and enemy attacks. And if you are willing to do this, you need only thrust [*put*] at him with humble prayer, and he will soon help you. Thrust [*put*] away then, and show how you acquit yourself. He is quite ready, and is only waiting for you. But what are you to do, and how are you to thrust [*put*] (chapter 2)?

And elsewhere the author repeatedly refers to a secret push or thrust of love, and to pushing or thrusting down thoughts that arise from intellectual curiosity – again language that irresistibly evokes bodily effort. Then there is the leading image of the whole work, the cloud of unknowing that stands between the contemplative and God, with its counterpart, the cloud of forgetting that he must set between himself and everything that is bodily and can be known. A cloud is more intangible than a lump, to be sure, yet these clouds are made more tangible by the concreteness of what the disciple is told to do with them, for example: 'And you must step above it stoutly but deftly, with a devout and delightful stirring of love, and struggle to pierce that darkness above you; and beat on that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love…' (chapter 6). Here, as often, concreteness undoes itself: how do you set about beating on a cloud with a sharp dart? 'Since there is no nonmetaphoric language to oppose to metaphors here, one must… multiply antagonistic metaphors.'[29] Though many more illustrations of the concreteness of

the *Cloud*'s language might be given, one must suffice, a passage where, in a simple, straightforward way, the world of the bodily senses is evoked in order to be dismissed, and yet evoked so vividly that we cannot in fact dismiss it:

> With your eyes you cannot conceive of anything except by its length or breadth, its smallness or largeness, its roundness or squareness, its distance or nearness, and its colour; with your ears, only by its noise or some kind of sound; with your nose, only by perfume or stench; with your taste, only by sour or sweet, salt or fresh, bitter or pleasing; and with your touch, only by hot or cold, hard or soft, rounded or sharp. And truly neither God nor spiritual things possess any of these qualities or quantities. So leave behind your outward senses, and do not work with them, either within or without (chapter 70).

We are told to leave the senses behind, but that is just what the language used will not allow us to do.

This powerful concreteness of language, and the way it stands in apparent opposition to the work's doctrine, have been remarked by scholars, but they have usually been content to note the opposition as a paradox. The author's greatest modern editor, for example, having illustrated the concrete strength and pithiness of the author's language, simply remarks: 'It is *unexpected* that teaching which above all urges abstraction from the shapes of reason and imagination should be couched so pre-eminently in concrete imagery and emotive diction.'[30] The paradox might be put more strongly still. Vernacular writing, as was mentioned above, is associated with speech, and the author constructs his work as a kind of spoken dialogue, in which questions and objections are put in the mouth of the disciple and answered by the teacher. This emphasis on speech necessarily intensifies the inappropriateness of the mode of expression to the doctrine expressed. He insists that 'time, place, and body, these three should be forgotten in all spiritual work' (*Cloud*, chapter 59), but speech cannot exist without time, place and body. It is a form of communication occupying real time, produced (before the invention of recording devices) by bodily organs, in an actual place, between people placed in relation to each other – one

here, the other there; one ‘I’, the other ‘thou’. The author continues: ‘And so take care when engaged in contemplative activity not to use the bodily ascension of Christ as a model for straining your imagination upwards in a bodily sense when praying, as if you wished to climb above the moon…’ In the original there are more second-person pronouns than in my translation, and the pronouns are singular, the familiar *thou* rather than the formal *you* (functioning somewhat as *tu* and *vous* still do in French): ‘And therfore bewar in this werk that *thou* take none ensaumple at the bodely assencion of Criste, for to streyne *thin* ymaginacion in the tyme of *thi* preier bodely upwardes, as *thou* woldest clymbe aboven the mone…’ It is not just that ‘as if thou wouldst climb above the moon’ invites us to imagine an ascent through space, but the repeated addresses to the recipient as *thou* evoke the situation of speech, of which time, place and body are necessarily parts as they are not of writing: *I* here, *thou* there, with a space between the two bodies.

Here it may be useful to compare the *Cloud* author with his contemporary, Hilton. Like the *Cloud* author, Hilton feels the need to resist the literalism, associated with Rolle’s enormously popular writings, that identifies contemplative experience with bodily sensation; but at the same time he wants to affirm the truth of analogies between the spiritual realm and daily experience in the material world. In *The Scale of Perfection*, Hilton writes that ‘God is light’, but immediately adds,

> This light shall not be understood as for bodily light, but it is understood thus.… Right as the sun showeth to the bodily eyes itself and all bodily thing by it; right so soothfastness, that is God, showeth to the reason of the soul itself first, and by itself all other ghostly thing that needeth to be known of a soul. (II:33)

So, though God cannot be literally understood as ‘bodily light’, to think about light as we experience it with our bodily senses *can* help towards an understanding of our experience of God. And Hilton beautifully exemplifies how our daily experience of light can

illuminate (so to put it) the special experience of contemplation. He sees the long process of achieving contemplation as a journey towards Jerusalem, and, imagining the heavenly city as an earthly city, explains that, as you approach it, 'by small sudden lightings that glide out through small crannies from that city thou shalt be able to see it from far, or [before] that thou come thereto' (II:25). That was surely what a real medieval city would have looked like from a distance at night: not the modern city's great glow staining half the sky, but fleeting glimpses of candlelight caught through small windows. And, on the other hand, Hilton points out that in mysticism there can be false lights, as when 'the feigned sun showeth him not but atwixt two black rainy clouds: then, because that the sun is near, there shineth out from the clouds a light as it were the sun, and is none' (II:26). Any medieval (or more recent) Englishman would be familiar with those black rainy clouds and their deceptive effect. *The Scale of Perfection* is among the greatest works of poetic prose in English, and much of its power derives from recurrent evocation of the familiar sensory world as a generous source of analogy for the distant realm of the divine.

The Cloud of Unknowing is also a great work of prose, but it conveys its different doctrine by different means. Consider a passage in which the *Cloud* author too evokes light and darkness. He is referring to the 'darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing' that stand between the would-be contemplative and God:

> Do not suppose, because I call it a darkness or a cloud, that it is a cloud condensed out of the vapours that float in the air, or a darkness like that in your (*thin*) house at night when your (*thi*) candle is out. By intellectual ingenuity you (*thou*) can imagine such a darkness or cloud brought before your (*thin*) eyes on the brightest day of summer, just as, conversely, in the darkest night of winter you (*thou*) can imagine a clear shining light. Give up such errors; that is not what I mean. For when I say 'darkness' I mean an absence of knowing, in the sense that everything you (*thou*) do not know, or have forgotten, is dark to you (*thee*), because you (*thou*) cannot see it with your (*thi*) mind's eye. And for this reason it is not called a cloud in the air but a cloud of unknowing that is between you (*thee*) and your (*thi*) God (chapter 4).

Do *not* suppose that I mean darkness like that in your house at night when your candle is out! How could the medieval reader or listener, living in a world of night-time darkness lit only by candles or fire, fail to imagine what he is told not to imagine, when it is so vividly evoked?– first the candle, then its absence. The imagination is stimulated to draw on the memories of daily experience stored in daily language. And the contradiction is heightened by the intensity of the deictic effect: *I* call it, *thine* house, *thy* candle, and the imperative verbs summoning up an *I–thou* situation (time, place and body) in which the imagination is being forbidden to operate as it is being compelled to operate. And this is the epitome of the *via negativa*, for there can be no negative theology without something to negate. This is indeed paradox, but it is not just paradox as a rhetorical figure; it has fundamental doctrinal implications.

As my earlier quotations from Wittgenstein and Derrida may have suggested, the focus on language in philosophical writings of a more recent era can help us to recognize how important the struggle with language is in the *Cloud* author's work. Wittgenstein also wrote that 'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language',[31] and one of his commentators explains:

> The philosopher is driven by a passionate desire to understand the limits of language, and, when he tries to satisfy this desire, the first thing that inevitably happens is that his mind is filled with images which, though they are delusive, have a primitive naturalness which he must experience. Then, and only then, can he go on to achieve the understanding that he seeks.[32]

The *Cloud* author too is driven by a passionate desire to understand the limits of language; we see this in the determined ingenuity with which he uncovers the bodiliness that limits the applicability to God of even the smallest and most neutral-seeming words, even prepositions, and the penetration with which he reveals the metaphors built into language that seems commonplace and literal, such as 'I'll stand by you'. But the danger of ordinary language can be grasped only if its bewitchment is actually experienced, and that

is what happens when we read the *Cloud* author's works. To give another, very simple example: some people mistakenly say, he remarks, that you should not undertake the contemplative life unless your bodily needs are provided for in advance. 'They say that God sends the cow, but not by the horn; and truly they say wrong of God' (*Cloud*, chapter 23). First our mind is filled with the engaging 'primitive naturalness' of this homely proverb, which is a more vivid way of saying 'God helps those who help themselves'; then it is snatched away from us, leaving an empty space, to be filled by an understanding that is not merely natural. In ways like this, we can gain *through* language an awareness of language's limits, and thus perhaps a faint sense of the shape of what transcends those limits, finding, as Derrida puts it, 'the crevice through which the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed'.[33] In the *Cloud* author's work, language is neither a transparent medium nor an obscuring cloak for theological thought; it is the very means by which theological thought operates. The author uses the materiality of the vernacular as a skilful wrestler uses the strength of his opponent in order to defeat him. And that suggests that he might have chosen to write in English rather than Latin for a reason other than the needs of the individual whom he initially addressed. One of his favourite words is 'work', by which he usually means the practical discipline of contemplation that he aims to teach. This term has the advantage of implying that the apparently idle contemplative, Mary as opposed to Martha, is also a labourer in the Lord's vineyard; at the same time, 'this work' can also refer to the written work in which the discipline is taught. (In my translation, to avoid misunderstanding, the bare word is often expanded to 'the work of contemplation' or 'contemplative activity'.) But the work of the *Cloud* is not just something to be done by the reader who wants to achieve contemplation; it is also the work of mystical theology, and it is done in the text itself, in that wrestling-match with language, even when the goal of the work is to point towards the realm of transcendence that lies outside language.

I do not mean to imply that the writings translated in this volume mark the author's victory over language. On the contrary, though he is a master of language, his mastery, like that of other poets, sometimes involves relinquishing mastery, allowing language to release potentialities of which he is not fully in control and sometimes perhaps not fully aware. I close this introduction with a closer look at the richly enigmatic relation between orthodoxy and heresy in the language in which he writes about images. An important feature of Lollardy was opposition to the use of images – crucifixes and pictures and statues of saints – in religious worship. Anne Hudson writes that 'the refusal of honour to images of saints, and the associated disrespect for pilgrimages, came to be perhaps the commonest Lollard beliefs', and she notes the prominence of this topic in university disputations in the *Cloud* author's time.[34] The *Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards* nailed to the door of Westminster Hall in 1395 include the statement that 'prayers and offerings made to blind crosses and to deaf images of wood and of stone are closely related to idolatry'.[35] Hudson notes too that 'The extent to which condemnation of all images was identified with Wycliffism… is revealed by the oath extracted from four Nottingham heretics in 1395 that they would "worship images by praying and offering to them in the worship of the saints that they are made to resemble".'[36] The fear of iconoclasm extended so far, then, that the worship of images could be required as a proof of orthodoxy, something not just acceptable but compulsory.

That makes all the more interesting the passage in chapter 2 of *Mystical Theology* in which the author uses a concrete example to illustrate how the *via negativa* applies to our attempt to 'see and know… him who is above all seeing and knowing'. (The ME original of this passage is given in the appendix.) The example is that of a man who wishes to carve out of a solid block of wood an image corresponding to one that exists only in his imagination. That, he writes, is 'how we must conduct ourselves in this high work of theology' in order to make 'an image of God's naked nature', because to our understanding he is never clearly revealed except as

something covered up and enwrapped and overlaid with innumerable material bodies and kinds of intelligible substance, with many marvellous fanciful images coagulated around him, as it were, in an encumbering lump, as the image in the illustration given above is hidden in the huge, thick, solid block. In the divine work of contemplation we must, with the dexterity of grace, skilfully pare completely away this encumbering lump, coagulated in this way out of innumerable unlikenesses, as a powerful hindrance antagonistic to the pure hidden sight of God.

The illustration of the statue concealed within the block and waiting to be revealed by the removal of all that is extraneous to it was not original, either with the *Cloud* author or with Pseudo-Dionysius.[37] It is important, though, to read the author as the poet he is, and attend not just to the idea but to what happens in the language used to express it. In Pseudo-Dionysius's Greek, the block is of marble, but our author has brought it into a dramatic and concrete medieval English context by making it of wood. 'Here is a man' with a block of wood 'lying in front of him', a 'huge, thick, solid block' the centre of which has to be determined by that familiar carpenter's tool, the plumb line – and our imaginations are incited to build up a picture of a material situation. But the author is well aware that, the more vividly he evokes the situation in its full physicality, the more it acts *against* the idea belonging to 'this high work of theology' that he wants it to exemplify. It is a 'crude (*boistous*) illustration' – and *boistous*, meaning coarse, gross, thick, crude, simple, is a word he often employs to refer to the deceptive physicality and bodiliness that hinder us from approaching God in his *naked* nature. Thus, paradoxically, the illustration is 'contrary in nature to what it illustrates'. When the ground of the comparison is explained, once more the concreteness of the vernacular language, so different from the abstraction of Latin, is used to evoke what prevents our understandings, limited as they are by their bodily housing, from approaching God's true nature. God is 'covered up and enwrapped and overlaid' with material supplied by our limited senses and intellects, 'coagulated around him, as it were, in an

encumbering lump (*kumbros clog*)', and that phrase *kumbros clog*, so evocative of disgusting clinging and frustrating hindrance, is repeated in the next sentence.

Here it may be worth digressing for a moment to observe that a sense of the difference between the *Cloud* author's attitude towards God and that of his contemporary Julian of Norwich emerges especially strongly from their uses of such imagery of covering and enwrapping. Julian writes, for example, that God 'is our clothing, wrapping us for love, embracing and enclosing us for tender love' (*Revelations*, Long Text, chapter 5), while for the *Cloud* author enwrapping and enclosing evoke not motherly tenderness but hindrance and defilement from which we must try to disentangle ourselves – a reflection, perhaps, of the way that in his society even more than in ours male identity was formed through rejection of the mother and the suffocating characteristics associated with femaleness. Covering and nakedness are important opposites in his thought, though at times, like Julian, he can see God as an 'ample garment' for the naked soul (*Privy Counselling*, chapter 8), and at times he can allow this image too to undo itself, writing of the contemplative as 'nakedly clothed' in God (*Privy Counselling*, chapter 12).

Somehow, for the *Cloud* author, the entangling '*un*likenesses' that form 'a powerful hindrance antagonistic to the pure hidden sight of God' must be pared away to reveal the sight itself, 'Beauty itself in its own naked, uncreated reality without beginning'. The task is hard enough, because the unlikenesses and hindrances arise from the human body and mind themselves, and the illustration of the image in the block of wood is itself one of those unlikenesses; but in their historical setting the words the author uses in this passage reveal still more deep-rooted difficulties. The whole scene evoked is that of the carving of a wooden image, one of those 'deaf images of wood' against which the Lollards' *Twelve Conclusions* protested; and yet the *Cloud* author is using this as a figure of what lies beyond figuration. The craftsman's task is 'to make an image' of what is unmade; and, worse still, the *kumbros clog*, the material that, in the

illustration, disgustingly obscures the ‘image’ that he wishes to make, itself consists of ‘many marvellous fanciful images’. What difference is there between the *image* that represents the unrepresentable and the *image* that obscures it? Is this orthodoxy or heresy? Each implies the other, and what emerges is the impossibility of thinking the orthodox view of images without becoming involved in the heretical view, and of thinking the heretical view without becoming involved in the orthodox view. Given that thought and writing are representations, representation is an almost impossibly difficult topic to think and write about. That may have been apparent to a profound thinker (which the *Cloud* author certainly was) in the period when he was writing, when age-old controversies about icons and iconoclasm were revived with new force and new danger; but I am not sure to what extent he can have intended to provide this textbook example of what Derrida claims to be true of philosophy in general. An astute critic writes of the *Cloud* author’s work as ‘a self-deconstructing attempt to undo the carnality of the language in which it is written’, in which we can see him ‘plumbing the possibilities for error both in the language in which he writes and in the vernacular reader for whom he writes’.[38] In the matter of images, to plumb the possibilities for error was likely to be a dangerous undertaking in the author’s time, though admittedly less so than it was to become a few years later, when the English Church started burning heretics at the stake. The very features that make the *Cloud* author’s work dangerously self-contradictory are precisely those that are essential to its meaning; and I am all too well aware of being unable to convey them fully in translation.[39] I hope that at least some readers of the translation will go on to use it as an aid to reading the original.

Notes

1. British Library Harleian 674 and Cambridge University Library Kk.vi.26 both contain all seven works; Harleian 2373 contains all except *The Mystical Theology of Saint Denis*.

2. See John P. H. Clark, 'The *Cloud of Unknowing*', in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany, 1984), pp. 273–91: 'The similarities of literary expression between the *Cloud* corpus and Hilton, together with the manner in which similar expressions are often used to express apparently similar but in fact quite distinct theological concepts as between the two bodies of works, become explicable if we suppose that the *Cloud* was in part a response to Hilton's *Ladder*[i.e., *Scale*] *of Perfection*, Book One, while the second part of Hilton's diptych was in turn influenced by the language and theology of the *Cloud*, without fully assimilating it' (p. 273).

3. For example, in his identification of himself with Beseleel in *Cloud*, chapter 73.

4. Peter Abelard, *Commentary on Romans* 3:23–6, quoted by R. W. Southern in *St Anselm and his Biographer* (Cambridge, 1966), p. 96. St Anselm of Canterbury and Aelred of Rievaulx were also important figures in this movement.

5. *Þe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd*, ed. W. Meredith Thompson (London, 1958), pp. 33–34.

6. *The Form of Living*, in *English Writings of Richard Rolle*, ed. Hope Emily Allen (Oxford, 1931), p. 105.

7. Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. Evelyn Underhill (London, 1923), I:47.

8. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (London, 1998), Long Text chapter 19, cf. Short Text chapters 10–11.

9. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. B. A. Windeatt (Harmondsworth, 1985), I:36.

10. Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford, 1988). Recent study suggests that in matters such as opposition to images there may have been 'some tradition of reformist thinking at least partly

independent of Wyclif ' that was then subsumed into Lollardy (Steven Justice, 'Lollardy', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 662–89; p. 669).

11. *Nicholas Love's Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. Michael G. Sargent (New York, 1992), p. 10 (my italics).

12. 'And he came to Derbe and Lystra. And, behold, there was a certain disciple there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman that believed; but his father was a Gentile' (Acts 16:1). See also Romans 16:21 (for 'fellow labourer'), I Corinthians 16:10, and II Corinthians 1:1.

13. Alastair J. Minnis, 'The Sources of *The Cloud of Unknowing*: A Reconsideration', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England* 2, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Exeter, 1982), pp. 63–75; p. 65. See also Bernard McGinn, 'Thomas Gallus and the New Mysticism', in his *The Flowering of Mysticism* (New York, 1998), pp. 78–87. McGinn points out that Gallus's 'affective Dionysianism' (p. 79) derived from his attempt to reconcile the Dionysian writings with the Song of Songs.

14. For example, Ninian Smart, 'What Would Buddhaghosa Have Made of *The Cloud of Unknowing*?', in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven A. Katz (New York, 1992), pp. 103–22; Maika J. Will, 'The Role of Passivity in the Prayer of *The Cloud of Unknowing', Mystics Quarterly* 19 (1993), 63–70. Parallels have also been suggested with Vedantic Hinduism. It should be borne in mind, however, that negative theology had been assimilated into the main stream of medieval scholastic thought; to take a single example, St Thomas Aquinas incorporated it into the proof of God's existence in his *Summa contra gentiles* (I:14).

15. Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth, 1972), p. 153.

16. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations*, Long Text, chapter 51.

17. See *Privy Counselling*, chapter 7: 'You set limits to your humility when you will not follow the advice of your spiritual master unless your intellect can see that it ought to be done. So here you can see

that I desire mastery over you. So I do, truly, and I intend to have it!'

18. See *Cloud*, chapter 64 (in an account of the 'faculties of the soul' derived from Richard of St Victor's *Benjamin Major*): 'Will is the faculty by which we choose good after it has been identified by reason, and by which we love God, desire God, and finally rest in God with complete joy and consent.'

19. *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1993): *mysticism*, sense 2.

20. These are the opening sentences of Father James Walsh's 'Translator's Introduction' to *A Letter of Private Direction* (i.e., *The Book of Privy Counselling*) in *The Pursuit of Wisdom and Other Works by the Author of The Cloud of Unknowing* (Mahwah, New Jersey, 1988), p. 185. The work by Cuthbert Butler, Abbot of Downside, to which Walsh refers is his deservedly influential *Western Mysticism* (London, 1922). Though in what follows I indicate dissatisfaction with Walsh's approach, I do not underestimate the debt that all work on the *Cloud* owes to his remarkable erudition.

21. Nicholas Watson, 'Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God', *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997), 85–124; p. 90.

22. See Hope Phyllis Weissman, 'Margery Kempe in Jerusalem: *Hysterica Compassio* in the Late Middle Ages', in *Acts of Interpretation: The Text in Its Contexts, 700–1600*, ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman, Oklahoma, 1982), pp. 201–17.

23. Porete was the first person to compose a work of mystical theology in the French vernacular; she was burned at the stake for heresy in 1310. One of the copies of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, the ME translation of her condemned writing, is found in the same manuscript as the only copy of the short version of Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*. See Nicholas Watson, 'Melting into God the English Way: Deification in the Middle English Version of Marguerite Porete's *Mirouer des simples aâmes anienties*', in *Prophets*

Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England, ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 19–49.

24. May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century, 1307–1399* (Oxford, 1959), p. 393. Gaunt eventually married Katharine in 1396, after his second wife's death.

25. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London, 1961), preface, p. 3.

26. 'What kind of heart is it, weary, wretched, and slothfully sleeping, that is not aroused by the pull of this love and the voice of this calling?'

27. 'Because throughout her life she had them with her wherever she went, as if in a burden bound up together and secretly stored in the depth of her heart'.

28. 'Unless these people have grace to give up such piping hypocrisy, I truly believe that, between the inward pride of their hearts and the outward humility of their words, their wretched souls will very soon sink into misery.'

29. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), p. 67.

30. Phyllis Hodgson, *Three 14th-Century English Mystics* (London, 1967), p. 29 (my italics). Similar comments have been made by other major scholars in this field. Alastair Minnis writes that ' *Despite* the anonymous author's constant dismissals of the imagination, he employs figurative language through out his treatise. Rich symbolism and imagery is used to evoke something which is, we are assured, beyond all literary symbolism and imagery' ('Affection and Imagination in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Hilton's *Scale of Perfection', Traditio* 39, 1983, pp. 323–66; p. 342; my italics), and J. P. H. Clark observes, 'His writing is certainly not lacking in vivid and powerful imagery, *yet* he is constantly driven to deny the adequacy of the very imagery concerning God which he uses' (*The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction*, vol. 1, Salzburg, 1995, p. 35; my italics).

31. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edn (New York, 1958), pt. 1, sect. 109, p. 47.

32. David Pears, *Wittgenstein* (London, 1971), p. 122.

33. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 14. The *Cloud* author's use of language is, I believe, deconstructive in Derrida's sense, that 'the movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, *except by inhabiting those structures*' (p. 24; my italics).

34. *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson (Cambridge, 1978), p. 179; *Premature Reformation*, p. 92.

35. *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, p. 27.

36. Anne Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, p. 307 (with my translation substituted for the ME original quoted by Hudson).

37. Phyllis Hodgson, in her edition of *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises on Contemplative Prayer* (Exeter, 1982), p. 192, points out that it is of Neoplatonic origin, and compares it with a passage in Plotinus.

38. Nicholas Watson, 'The Middle English Mystics', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, pp. 539–65; pp. 552–3.

39. Here is a single example, from this same passage, of the untranslatable. The phrase translated as 'a powerful hindrance' is plural in the original: *stronge letters*. The spelling *stronge*, however, can also represent a different ME word, *straunge*, meaning 'strange' or 'alien', which would surely be appropriate in this context of unlikeness. And *letters* (here 'hinderers' or 'hindrances') would more normally mean 'letters' or 'writing', often with the implication of the literal (as opposed to the allegorical or spiritual) sense. That too seems an obvious possibility in a work so conscious of language, and especially of language understood in a literal or bodily sense as a barrier to understanding as well as a means of understanding. All these may well be coexistent possibilities, though not necessarily ones of which the author was fully conscious.

FURTHER READING

Burrow, J. A., 'Fantasy and Language in *The Cloud of Unknowing', Essays in Criticism* 27 (1977), 283–98

Butler, Cuthbert, *Western Mysticism* (London, 1922)

Chartrand-Burke, Tony, 'Against the Proud Scholars of the Devil: Anti-Intellectual Rhetoric in *The Cloud of Unknowing', Mystics Quarterly* 23 (1997), 115–36

Clark, John P. H., 'The *Cloud of Unknowing*', in *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany, 1984), pp. 273–91

Clark, John P. H., *The Cloud of Unknowing: An Introduction*, 3 vols. (Salzburg, 1995–6)

The Cloud of Unknowing, trans. James Walsh (Mahwah, New Jersey, 1981)

The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises on Contemplative Prayer, ed. Phyllis Hodgson (Exeter, 1982)

Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976)

Derrida, Jacques, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', trans. Ken Frieden, in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (New York, 1987), pp. 3–70

Forman, Robert K., 'Mystical Experience in the *Cloud*-Literature', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England* 4, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 177–95

Gillespie, Vincent, 'Postcards from the Edge: Interpreting the Ineffable in the Middle English Mystics', in *Interpretation: Medieval*

and Modern, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 137–65

Glasscoe, Marion, *English Medieval Mystics: Games of Faith* (London, 1993), chapter 4

Hodgson, Phyllis, *Three 14th-Century English Mystics* (London, 1967)

Hudson, Anne, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford, 1988)

Justice, Steven, 'Lollardy', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 662–89

Knowles, David, *The English Mystical Tradition* (London, 1961)

Lees, Rosemary Ann, *The Negative Language of the Dionysian School of Mystical Theology: An Approach to the Cloud of Unknowing*, 2 vols. (Salzburg, 1983)

McGinn, Bernard, *The Flowering of Mysticism* (New York, 1998)

Minnis, Alastair, 'The Sources of *The Cloud of Unknowing*: A Reconsideration', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England* 2, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Exeter, 1982), pp. 63–75

Minnis, Alastair, 'Affection and Imagination in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*', *Traditio* 39 (1983), 323–66

Myles, Robert, ' "This Litil Worde 'Is' ": The Existential Metaphysics of the *Cloud* Author', *Florilegium* 8 (1986), 140–68

Norquist, Bruce, 'Glossary of Certain Key Theological Terms in the *Cloud*', in *The Mystical Tradition and the Carthusians* 1, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg, 1995), pp. 23–59

Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, New Jersey, 1987)

The Pursuit of Wisdom and Other Works by the Author of the Cloud of Unknowing, trans. James Walsh (Mahwah, New Jersey, 1988)

Rovang, Paul R., 'Demythologizing Metaphor in *The Cloud of Unknowing', Mystics Quarterly* 18 (1992), 131–7

Sikka, Sonya, ‘Transcendence in Death: A Heideggerian Approach to *Via Negativa* in *The Cloud of Unknowing*’, in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England* 5, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 179–92

Smart, Ninian, ‘What Would Buddhaghosa Have Made of *The Cloud of Unknowing*?’, in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven A. Katz (New York, 1992), pp. 103–22

Tixier, René, ‘ “Pis louely blinde werk”: Contemplation in *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Related Treatises’, in *Mysticism and Spirituality in England*, ed. William F. Pollard and Robert Boenig (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 107–37

Turner, Denys, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1995), chapter 8

Watson, Nicholas, ‘Melting into God the English Way: Deification in the Middle English Version of Marguerite Porete’s *Mirouer des simples âmes anienties*’, in *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 19–49

Watson, Nicholas, ‘Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God’, *New Medieval Literatures* 1 (1997), 85– 124

Watson, Nicholas, ‘The Middle English Mystics’, in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 539–65

Will, Maika J., ‘The Role of Passivity in the Prayer of *The Cloud of Unknowing’, Mystics Quarterly* 19 (1993), 63–70

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The translations in this volume are based on the superb edition by Phyllis Hodgson, *The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises on Contemplative Prayer* (Exeter: Catholic Records Press, 1982), which is a revised version of her two Early English Text Society volumes, *The Cloud of Unknowing and The Book of Privy Counselling*, EETS OS 218 (London, 1944) and *Deonise Hid Diuinite and Other Treatises on Contemplative Prayer*, EETS OS 231 (London, 1955). My aim has been to translate as closely as is compatible with clear understanding, rather than to try to give readers the illusion of reading a modern text. Where I could, I have attempted to reproduce the stylistic features of the original, including the patches of alliteration that are characteristic of Middle English devotional prose; but the author's syntax is sometimes extremely complex, and on occasions when I thought there was a real danger of misunderstanding, I have divided long sentences into shorter ones. He surprisingly often employs constructions such as 'he or she' and 'man or woman', but in general he follows the custom of his time in using masculine nouns and pronouns to refer to humanity in general. In this one area I have thought it best to defer to modern sensitivities, and, where possible (which is by no means everywhere), have used genderless forms such as 'a person', 'one', 'we', 'someone', or 'anyone'.

In the introduction and notes, translations from Middle English and Latin, except where otherwise stated, are my own. In quotations from Middle English originals, obsolete characters are replaced by their modern equivalents. In the notes, 'ME' is used to stand for 'Middle English'. The Bible is quoted in English from the Douai-Rheims translation, the sixteenth-century version of the Latin

Vulgate text that was used in the Middle Ages, in the eighteenth-century revision by Challoner.

The Mystical Theology of St Denis

The Prologue to the Translation of the Mystical Theology of St Denis

The writing that follows is the English version of a book written by St Denis to Timothy, which is called in Latin *Mystica Theologia*.[1] It is stated in chapter 70 of an earlier book called *The Cloud of Unknowing* that Denis's argument will clearly confirm everything that is written in the *Cloud*, and for that reason, in translating it, I have not only followed the literal sense of the text, but, to clarify its difficulties, I have closely followed the interpretation of the Abbot of St Victor, a noble and excellent expositor of the book.[2]

The Prayer of St Denis

Everlasting Wisdom without beginning, who are in yourself the First Cause transcending all being, the transcendent Godhead[3] and the transcendent Good, the inward beholder of the divinely created wisdom of Christians:[4] I beseech you to raise us to a capacity that accords with the transcendently unknown and transcendently shining height of your dark, inspired utterances, where all the secret matters of theology are concealed and hidden under the transcendently shining darkness of wisest silence, making that which is transcendently bright shine transcendently in the secrecy of the greatest darkness; and, in a way that is always invisible and

intangible, transcendently to fill all those souls that do not rely on intellectual sight[5] full of supremely beautiful brightness.

And because these matters are beyond understanding, I desire with love beyond understanding as best I can to gain them for myself with this prayer.

Chapter 1
How a person is to advance in this mystical theology by negation[6] of all that is on this side of God

Timothy my friend, whenever by the stirring of divine grace you set yourself to undertake the active exercise of your blind contemplation, see that with strong, prudent and eager contrition you forsake your bodily senses (namely hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch), and also your spiritual senses, otherwise known as your intellectual activities; and all things that can be known outwardly by any of your five bodily senses; and all things that can be known inwardly by your spiritual senses; and all things that now exist or that have existed though they do not now exist; and all things that do not now exist, or that may exist in the future though they do not now exist. And, so far as it is possible for me to express this and for you to understand it, see that you ascend with me in this grace, in a way that is beyond what you know, to be made one with him who is above all being and all ways of knowing. For, by transcendence of yourself and all other things, and by thus cleansing your feelings of all worldly, fleshly and natural pleasures, and your intellect of everything that can be known according to its own form, then, once everything has been negated in this way, you will be drawn up in your feelings above understanding to the radiance of divine darkness that transcends all being.

Take care that none of those unwise people still dwelling in their senses hear about these matters. That is what I call all those who are bound down to knowing and loving the things that can be known and that have a beginning, and whose opinion is that nothing is

transcendently higher than such existing things. They expect to know him who has ‘made darkness his hiding place’[7] by means of their own kind of knowledge. And since, according to the prophet,[8] the divine teachings of these secrets are above these people, what then shall we say of those who are more unwise, still dwelling not just in their intellectual understanding of natural philosophy,[9] but low down beneath them in the bodily senses which they have in common only with beasts? For these people do not know how to achieve knowledge of the First Cause, which is transcendently set above all things, except by making figures of the last and least worthy of existing visible things, such as stocks or stones; and they say that there is nothing higher than those wicked and multifarious shapes, created by themselves in their capricious imaginations.

In no way is it so. This is how it must be: we need to acknowledge, recognize and affirm in him who is above all knowledge and intellect all the positive attributes of all existing things, in that he is the cause of all things; and more appropriately and more firmly we need to deny all such attributes, in that he is transcendently above them all, supreme in his own nature and distinct from them all; and not to be of opinion that the denial of existing things is contrary to the original affirmation of them, but to hold steadfastly what is seen in faith, that he who in himself is above all things is above all negation of things that exist or could exist, yes, above both their negation and their affirmation.

It is for this reason that the saintly Bartholomew, Christ’s apostle, states in his writing that Christian theology is both great and minute; and that the Gospel is broad and great, but (he says soon afterwards) it is narrow and small.[10] It appears to me that he was carried up to supernatural insight when stating that the good Cause of all things speaks both in many words and in brief sayings, for he possessed neither reason nor understanding by means of which he could reach him who is set in transcendence above all existing things. Yet, for all that, he is not concealed but manifests himself openly in truth and clarity, not to all, but only to those who rise

above all existing things, pure as well as impure, and who pass beyond all ascents to all the holy bounds or limits that are set for human beings or angels, and who abandon all divine illuminations and all heavenly sounds and words, and enter with love into darkness, where, as the Scripture shows, he truly is who is above all.[11]

See this illustrated in the history which tells of the godly Moses, the humblest of men:[12] first he was told to be purified both in himself and also in his people, and after that to be separated from all occasion of defilement.[13] And then, after all the purification of him and his people, he heard many sounds of trumpets, and saw many lights shining, sending out very broad and pure beams.[14] And afterwards he was separated from the multitude of his people, and with chosen priests he attained the height of the ascent to God, which is the limit and bound of human understanding, however much it may be assisted by grace.[15] Yet in all this he was not with God in a manner corresponding to the perfection of his divinity; the object of his contemplation was not God himself, for he cannot be seen by the eye of contemplation; but the place where God was, that was his object. And that place symbolizes the highest divine vision, passing beyond all human reasonings and holding them in subjection as a lady does her handmaidens. By this divine vision the presence of him who is above all thought is transcendently revealed to man's understanding, and places him above the limits of his own nature. And then he is freed both from the intellectual faculties of his soul and from their objects, which is to say, from all things on which they operate.

It was at this point that, in singleness of love, Moses was separated from the chosen priests mentioned above, and entered by himself the darkness of unknowing,[16] darkness which is truly hidden, and in which all intelligible knowledge is shut up; and, in an invisible and intangible manner, having neither feeling nor thought of any existing thing, nor yet of himself, he was made to experience in every way the presence of him who is above all things. But in the

emptying out of all knowledge of what is entirely unknowable, he is united with him in the best way; and in knowing nothing he is made to know beyond understanding.

Chapter 2
How we are to be united to the Cause of all things, who is above all things

We pray to be raised up in this transcendently shining darkness, and, by seeing nothing and by not knowing, to see and know in this very absence of sight and knowledge him who is above all seeing and all knowing; and, through the negation of all things that exist, to praise in transcendence him who is intrinsically transcendent. The method of this negation can be seen from the following example.

Here is a man who has a solid block of wood of the largest size.[17] It is outside himself, lying in front of him, while within himself he has the intention and skill to make an image of the smallest size from that part of the wood which, measured by plumb line, lies in the centre and middle of the block. While the block is still completely whole, the image may exist inside himself through the sheer power of imagination, but common sense tells you that before he can manage to see it clearly with the bodily sight of his outward eyes, or reveal it to be seen by others, he must always use his skill and his tools to remove all the outward parts of the wood that surround the image and prevent it from being seen. That is just how we must conduct ourselves in this high work of theology, so far as our understanding can be aided by such a crude illustration, so contrary in nature to what it illustrates.

For in this work we must be like people making an image of God's naked nature, uncreated and without beginning. Though it is unconstrained in itself and to itself – inside all creatures yet not enclosed; outside all creatures yet not excluded; above all creatures

yet not forced up; below all creatures yet not thrust down; behind all creatures yet not pushed back; in front of all creatures yet not driven forward – yet all the same, to human understanding, as long as it is linked to this corruptible body, he is never clearly revealed except as something covered up and enwrapped and overlaid with innumerable material bodies and kinds of intelligible substance, with many marvellous fanciful images coagulated around him, as it were, in an encumbering lump, as the image in the illustration given above is hidden in the huge, thick, solid block. In the divine work of contemplation we must, with the dexterity of grace, skilfully pare completely away this encumbering lump, coagulated in this way out of innumerable unlikenesses,[18] as a powerful[19] hindrance antagonistic to the pure hidden sight of God. And thus, through the dexterous removal of all these things, brought about by grace, we can praise clearly, beyond understanding, Beauty itself in its own naked, uncreated reality without beginning. How this can be done is unknown to all except those alone who experience it, and even to them is unknown except while the experience lasts.

All of us who practise this theology need to make our denials in the opposite way to our affirmations; for when we put forward our affirmations we begin at the noblest of existing things and descend in order by intermediate stages to the least noble, but in our denials we begin with the least noble and mount up to the most noble; and later, moving from the highest by stages to the lowest, and back from the lowest to the highest, we fold them all together and remove them all, so that we may know clearly that unknowing that is walled round against all powers of knowledge in all existing things; and so that we may see the transcendent darkness that is secretly hidden from all light in existing things.

Chapter 3
Which books are of positive theology and which of negative

For this reason in our other books of theology, and especially in those of positive theology, first in the *Hierarchies of Heaven* and second in the *Hierarchies of the Church Militant*,[20] we have affirmed with praise how the high, divine, unique nature which is God is one; how it is three, and in accordance with its own nature is called Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; how there burst forth from the Immaterial, the sole Good in and of himself, the rays of goodness dwelling in his heart; and how in this dwelling in himself in unity of substance and in themselves in trinity of persons and in these together with an equally everlasting efflorescence, they dwell ever unchanging; how the transcendent Jesus has taken on the substance of true human nature; and all other such matters as are expressed in Scripture are affirmatively praised in those two books.

And in the book *On God's Names*[21] it is affirmatively stated with praise that he is named Good, Being, Life, Wisdom, and Power, and whatever other may be the intelligible names of God. But in the book *On the Compendium of Divine Meanings*[22] I have affirmatively stated with praise all the names taken from material things that are applied to God – what are the divine forms and the divine figures, what are his parts and his instruments,[23] what are his places and his adornments, what are his frenzies and his griefs, what are his madnesses and his drunkennesses, what are his gluttonies and his oaths and his curses, what are his sleeps and his awakenings, and whatever other material qualities are in any way attributed to God in Holy Scripture.

I suppose you have seen all this, and how these latter things involve more words than the former. It was necessarily the case that the former two books, the *Celestial* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*, and the exposition of the divine names in the third, involved fewer words than the *Compendium of Divine Meanings* mentioned last. For in proportion as we consider the things that are highest, so the words that are spoken of them to correspond to our perceptions limit our understanding. So it is here, in the present book: when we enter into the darkness that is beyond understanding, we shall find not only a growing lack of words but, as it were, a madness and a complete irrationality in all that we say. In composing all the other books, we descended from the highest things to the lowest, and the further we descended, the greater the copiousness of our writing. But now in this book we ascend from the lowest things to the highest, and our words are limited in proportion to the ascent, which is swifter at one moment than another. And once this ascent is over, there will be no voice, and all will be united with that which is unspeakable.

But perhaps you ask: what is the reason why in positive theology we begin with the noblest things, and in negative theology with those that are least noble? This is the reason: when we wish to designate God, who is in himself above all affirmation and all understanding, by affirming of him that which can be understood, it is most fitting that we should begin by affirming the things that are noblest and nearest to him. And if we wish to designate him by negating that which is intelligible, it is most fitting that we should begin by negating the things that are perceived to be furthest from him. For instance: ‘life’ or ‘goodness’ is nearer and more fitting to him than ‘air’ or ‘stone’; and it would be more obviously appropriate to deny him gluttony and madness than speech or understanding. And yet in himself he is above all speech and all understanding.

Chapter 4
That he who is the Cause of all that can be perceived by the senses cannot be so perceived

Beginning from what is furthest, we first remove from God that which is without substance and everything that does not exist; for these are further than the things that merely exist and do not have life. [And then we remove the things that merely exist and do not have life,][24] for they are further than what exists and has life. And after that we remove the things that exist and have life but lack feeling, for they are further than those that have feeling. And after that we remove those that have feeling but lack reason and understanding, for they are further than those that have reason and understanding. And at the same time we remove from him all bodily things, and all that belongs to the body or bodily things, such as shape, form, quality, quantity, weight, location, visibility, sensibility, and all acting and being acted upon; all excess of fleshly appetite, all immoderation of physical passion, all subjection to material occurrences, all need of light; and all coming into existence and all decay, all division and all passibility, and all temporal succession by process of time. For he is not and has not any of these, or any or all other things perceptible to the senses.

Chapter 5
That he who is the Cause of all that is intelligible is not himself intelligible

And then, ascending and beginning our denials and negations at the highest of intelligible things, we say that he is neither soul nor angel, nor does he have imagination or opinion or reason or understanding; nor is he reason or understanding; nor is he spoken or understood. And – to pass from these high things by intermediate stages to the lowest things – he is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness, or equality, or likeness, or unlikeness; nor does he stand or move or keep silence or speak. And – to turn back by intermediate stages to the highest things, and end our denials at the highest – we say that he has no power, nor is he power, or light, nor does he live, nor is he life or substance or age or time, nor is there any intelligible contact with him, nor is he knowledge or truth or kingship or wisdom or one or unity or Godhead or goodness; nor is he spirit according to our understanding of spirit; nor sonship nor fatherhood nor anything else known to us or to any who exist; nor is he any of the things that do not exist or any of the things that do exist; nor does any of the things that are known know him as he is; nor does he know the things that exist as they are in themselves, but as they are in him; nor is there any means of approaching him by reason or understanding; he has no name; there is no knowledge of him; he is neither darkness nor light, neither error nor truth; nor, all told, can he be affirmed or denied, but when we attribute by affirmation or remove by denial any or all of the things that are not himself, we can neither posit nor negate him, nor in any intelligible way affirm or deny him. For the perfect and unique Cause of all things must necessarily lack the possibility of comparison with the

highest height, and be above all positing and negation. And his incomprehensible transcendence is incomprehensibly above all affirmation and denial.

Here Begins a Book of Contemplation called *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in which a soul is made one with God

Prayer

God, to whom all hearts are open, and to whom all desires speak, and from whom no secrets are hidden, I beseech you to cleanse my heart's purpose with the inexpressible gift of your grace, so that I may perfectly love you and worthily praise you. Amen.[1]

Prologue

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, I command and beseech you, with as much strength and force as the bond of love is capable of bearing, whoever you may be that have this book in your possession, whether by owning it or being in charge of it, whether by carrying it as a messenger or borrowing it, that so far as you are able you do not willingly and deliberately read it, copy it, speak of it, or allow it to be read, copied, or spoken of, by anyone or to anyone, except by or to a person who, in your opinion, has undertaken truly and without reservation to be a perfect follower of Christ – not only in the active life, but at the highest point of the contemplative life that may be attained by grace in this present existence by a perfected soul still dwelling in this mortal body – and one too who does all he can, and, in your

opinion, has long done so, to prepare himself for the contemplative life by means of virtuous active living; for otherwise it has nothing to do with him.

And furthermore I command and beseech you, by the authority of love, if any such persons should read it, copy it, or speak of it, or should hear it being read or spoken of, that you should command them, as I do you, to take time to read it, speak of it, copy it, or hear it, all through. For it may perhaps contain some material at the beginning or in the middle which is left incomplete and not fully explained where it stands; and if not there, it is explained soon afterwards, or else at the end. So, if someone saw one part of the material and not another, he might perhaps be easily led into error; and therefore, so that you and all others may avoid this error, I beg you for love's sake to do as I say.

I do not desire that this book should be seen by worldly chatterers, public self-praisers or fault-finders, newsmongers, gossips or scandalmongers, or detractors of any kind, for it was never my intention to write of such matters for them. And so I do not wish them, or anyone driven by mere curiosity, whether educated or uneducated,[2] to concern themselves with it. Indeed, these matters have nothing to do even with people who lead truly good active lives, except for those who, though their outward manner of existence belongs to the active life, are nevertheless inwardly and secretly stirred by the Spirit of God, whose judgements are hidden, to be inclined by grace towards the highest level of contemplative activity – not continually, as is appropriate for true contemplatives, but to share in it now and then. If such people were to see the book, they would, by God's grace, be greatly helped by it.[3]

The book is divided into seventy-five chapters, the very last of which teaches a number of signs by which a soul may test whether or not it is called by God to take part in this work of contemplation.

List of chapters[4]

Chapter 1 The four levels of Christian life; and the process by which the book's recipient was called.

Chapter 2 A brief exhortation to humility and to the work[5] described in this book.

Chapter 3 How the work described in this book is to be undertaken, and its superiority in value to all others.

Chapter 4 The brevity of this work, and how it may not be achieved by intellectual ingenuity or by imagination.

Chapter 5 While this work is being performed, all created beings that have ever existed, exist now or ever shall exist, and all their deeds, must be hidden beneath the cloud of forgetting.

Chapter 6 A brief account of the work described in this book, by question and answer.

Chapter 7 How someone undertaking this work is to oppose himself to all thoughts, and especially to those that arise from the ingenuity of his own learning and natural intelligence.

Chapter 8 A clear explanation of certain doubts that may occur in the course of this work, by question and answer; destroying the ingenuity of our own learning and natural intelligence; and distinguishing the levels and parts of active and contemplative life.

Chapter 9 While this work is being performed, thoughts of the holiest of all God's creations hinder more than they help.

Chapter 10 How to know when a thought is not sinful; and, if it is sinful, when it is deadly and when venial.

Chapter 11 Each thought and impulse should be weighed according to its own nature, and carelessness about venial sin should always be avoided.

Chapter 12 By means of this work, not only is sin destroyed, but virtues are acquired.

Chapter 13 What the nature of humility is, and when it is perfect and when imperfect.

Chapter 14 Without passing through imperfect humility, it is impossible for a sinner to achieve in this life the perfect virtue of humility.

Chapter 15 A brief confutation of the error of those who say that there is no more perfect means to humility than thoughts of one's own sinfulness.

Chapter 16 A sinner who is truly converted and called to contemplation comes to perfection by means of this work sooner than by any other, and by it can soonest gain God's forgiveness of sins.

Chapter 17 A true contemplative does not wish to concern himself with active life, with anything that is done or spoken about him, or with answering those who criticize him by excusing himself.

Chapter 18 As Martha complained about Mary, so down to the present day all actives complain about contemplatives, the cause of these complaints being ignorance.

Chapter 19 A brief justification of the author of this book, teaching that all contemplatives should fully pardon all actives for their complaints in word and deed.

Chapter 20 Almighty God will answer well for all those who choose not to give up their devotion to loving him in order to justify themselves.

Chapter 21 The true explanation of the Gospel statement that Mary has chosen the best part.

Chapter 22 The wonderful love that Christ had for Mary, as the representative of all sinners who are truly converted and called to the grace of contemplation.

Chapter 23 God will answer and provide in spirit for those who, out of devotion to his love, choose not to answer for themselves or make provision for themselves.

Chapter 24 What the nature of charity is, and how it is skilfully and perfectly contained within the work described in this book.

Chapter 25 While this work is being performed a perfect soul has no special regard to any individual living person.

Chapter 26 Without very special grace, or long experience of common grace, the work described in this book is extremely burdensome; and what part of this work is that of the soul aided by grace, and what part is God's alone.

Chapter 27 Who should undertake the work dependent on grace described in this book.

Chapter 28 No one should presume to undertake this work until he is duly cleansed in conscience of all particular sins he has committed.

Chapter 29 A person should labour perseveringly in this work, and endure the pain it causes, and judge no one.

Chapter 30 Who should criticize and reprove the faults of others.

Chapter 31 How someone beginning this work should conduct himself in opposing all sinful thoughts and impulses.

Chapter 32 Two spiritual stratagems that are helpful to a spiritual beginner in the work described in this book.

Chapter 33 In this work a soul is cleansed both of his particular sins and of their punishment; yet in this life there is no perfect rest.

Chapter 34 God grants his grace freely without any intermediary, and it may not be achieved through intermediaries.

Chapter 35 Three ways in which an apprentice contemplative should be occupied: reading, thinking and praying.

Chapter 36 The meditations of those who struggle continually in the work described in this book.

Chapter 37 The special prayers of those who are persevering workers in the work described in this book.

Chapter 38 How and why brief prayer pierces heaven.

Chapter 39 How a perfect worker is to pray, and what the nature of prayer is; and, if someone is to pray in words, which words agree best with the nature of prayer.

Chapter 40 While performing this work, a soul has no special regard to any individual vice or virtue.

Chapter 41 In all activities inferior to this we should be moderate, but not in this.

Chapter 42 By being immoderate in this, and certainly in no other way, we shall be moderate in everything else.

Chapter 43 If a soul is truly to experience the perfection of this work in this life, all knowledge and feeling of its own being must necessarily be lost.

Chapter 44 How a soul should prepare itself on its own part to destroy all knowledge and feeling of its own being.

Chapter 45 A detailed explanation of certain deceptions that may occur in this work.

Chapter 46 Full instruction how to avoid these deceptions, and to work with eagerness of spirit rather than with any crude bodily force.

Chapter 47 Wise instruction about purity of spirit in this work, explaining how a soul should reveal its desire in one way to God and in the opposite way to human beings.

Chapter 48 God wishes to be served with both body and soul, and will reward us in both; and how to know when all the sounds and sweet sensations that are experienced in body during prayer are good and when evil.

Chapter 49 The substance of perfection is nothing but a good will; and all sounds, pleasures, and sweet sensations that can occur in this life are, as it were, nothing but its accidents.

Chapter 50 What pure love is; and how for some people such sensory pleasures occur only seldom, and for others often.

Chapter 51 We should be extremely careful not to understand in a bodily sense what is meant spiritually; and it is especially desirable to be careful in understanding the words IN and UP.

Chapter 52 How young, presumptuous disciples misunderstand the word IN; and the deceptions that follow from this.

Chapter 53 Various kinds of unseemly behaviour that attend those who disregard the work discussed in this book.

Chapter 54 By means of this work we are able to conduct ourselves well and act becomingly, in body as well as in soul.

Chapter 55 Those who are led by fervour of spirit to reprove others indiscriminately for sin are deceived.

Chapter 56 Those who rely more on the ingenuity of natural intelligence and of learning acquired in secular studies than on the accepted teaching and guidance of Holy Church are deceived.

Chapter 57 Young, presumptuous disciples misunderstand the word UP; and the deceptions that follow from this.

Chapter 58 We should not take St Martin and St Stephen as models, and try to force our corporeal imaginations upwards when praying.

Chapter 59 We should not take Christ's bodily ascension into heaven as a model, and try to force our corporeal imaginations upwards when praying; and time, place and body should all three be forgotten in all spiritual activity.

Chapter 60 The main and shortest road to heaven is run by desires and not by footsteps.

Chapter 61 All bodily things are subject to spiritual things, and in accordance with the order of nature are governed by them, and not the reverse.

Chapter 62 How we may know when our spiritual work is beneath us or outside us, and when it is level with us or within us, and when it is above us and beneath God.

Chapter 63 The faculties of the soul in general, and in particular how consciousness is a principal faculty, embracing within itself all the other faculties and all the matters on which they work.

Chapter 64 The other two principal faculties, reason and will, and their work before and after sin existed.

Chapter 65 The first secondary faculty, called imagination, its work, and its obedience to reason before and after sin existed.

Chapter 66 The second secondary faculty, called sense-perception, its work, and its obedience to reason before and after sin existed.

Chapter 67 Anyone who does not know the soul's faculties and the way they operate may easily be deceived in understanding spiritual language and spiritual activity; and how a soul is deified by grace.

Chapter 68 Nowhere in the body is everywhere in the spirit; and how to our outer man the work described in this book is nothing.

Chapter 69 How our feelings vary extraordinarily when we experience this nothing in spirit, which happens nowhere.

Chapter 70 Just as through the failing of our bodily senses we can most readily begin to achieve knowledge of spiritual things, so through the failing of our spiritual senses we can most readily begin to achieve knowledge of God, so far as it may be attained here by grace.

Chapter 71 Some may achieve experience of the perfection of this work only at moments of ecstasy, and some may have it when they will, in the ordinary state of the human soul.

Chapter 72 One person engaged in this work should not judge or think of another according to his own experience.

Chapter 73 We benefit in three ways from this grace of contemplation, corresponding to the ways in which Moses, Beseleel and Aaron concerned themselves with the Ark of the Covenant, which is a symbol of this grace.

Chapter 74 A soul inclined towards the subject matter of this book can never read or discuss it, or hear it being read or discussed, without a feeling of true harmony with the purpose of the work it describes; and a restatement of the command written in the prologue.

Chapter 75 Certain tokens by which one may test whether one is called by God to perform this work.

Spiritual friend in God, I pray and beseech you to give earnest consideration to the order and manner in which you have been called. And thank God sincerely, so that, with the help of his grace, you may stand firm in the inward state and level and outward form of life that you have deliberately undertaken, and resist all the

cunning attacks of your enemies, in body and in spirit, and gain the crown of everlasting life. Amen.

Chapter 1

Spiritual friend in God, you must understand that, to my simple perception, there are four levels and forms of Christian life: Ordinary, Special, Solitary, and Perfect. Three of these can be begun and completed here on earth, while the fourth can by grace be begun here, but it will last for ever, unendingly, in the blessedness of heaven. And just as you see them set out here in order – first Ordinary, then Special, next Solitary, and last Perfect – so, in the same order and sequence, it appears that our Lord in his great mercy has called you and led you to him by the desire of your heart.

For you know well that at first, when you were living on the ordinary level of Christian life in the company of your earthly friends, it seemed that God, in the everlasting love by which he made and fashioned you when you were nothing, and then redeemed you at the cost of his precious blood when you were lost with Adam, could not allow you to be so distant from him in your manner and level of life. And so in his grace he kindled your desire, and fastened to it a leash of longing, and led you by it into a more special state and form of life, to be a servant of his intimate servants; and there you were able to learn to live in his service more intimately and spiritually than you did or could have done previously on the ordinary level of life. And what then? It seems that, in the heart's love he has had for you since you began to exist, he would not give you up so easily. But what did he do? Do you not see how eagerly and how graciously he pulled you up to the third level and manner of life, which is called Solitary? And in that solitary form and manner of life you can learn to lift up the foot of your love and step towards the state and level of life that is perfect, the last state of all.

Chapter 2

Look up now, you weak wretch, and see what you are. What are you, and what have you deserved, to be called like this by our Lord? What kind of heart is it, weary, wretched, and slothfully sleeping, that is not aroused by the pull of this love and the voice of this calling? Wretch, at this moment beware of your enemy,[6] and do not think yourself any holier or better because this calling is so noble or because of the solitary form of life you have adopted, but think yourself all the more wretched and accursed unless you do the best you can, by grace and counsel,[7] to live in accordance with your vocation. And you should be all the humbler and more loving towards your spiritual bridegroom,[8] because he, almighty God, King of kings and Lord of lords, was willing to humble himself so deeply towards you, and so graciously to choose you from among the whole flock of his sheep to be one of his intimates, and then placed you in the pastureland where you can be fed with the sweetness of his love, as a foretaste of your inheritance, the kingdom of heaven.

Press on quickly then, I beg you. Look forward now, and forget backwards, and see what you lack, and not what you have: that is the easiest way to get and keep humility. Your whole life now must always consist of desire, if you are to make progress on the level of perfection. This desire must always be shaped in your will by the hand of almighty God and with your own consent. But I tell you one thing: he is a jealous lover and will put up with no rivalry, and he will not work in your will unless he is with you alone by himself. He demands no help, but only yourself. He only wants you to watch him and let him alone; and guard the windows and door against flies[9] and enemy attacks. And if you are willing to do this, you need

only thrust at him with humble prayer, and he will soon help you. Thrust away then, and show how you acquit yourself. He is quite ready, and is only waiting for you. But what are you to do, and how are you to thrust?

Chapter 3

Lift up your heart towards God with a humble stirring[10] of love; and think of himself, not of any good to be gained from him. See, too, that you refuse to think of anything but him, so that nothing acts in your intellect or will but God himself. And do what you can[11] to forget all of God's creations and all their actions, so that your thoughts and desires are not directed and do not reach out towards any of them, in general or in particular. But leave them alone, and pay no heed to them.

This is the work of the soul that pleases God most. All the saints and angels rejoice in this work, and hasten to help it with all their might. All the devils are driven crazy when you do this, and try to frustrate it in all ways they can. All people living on earth are marvellously helped by this work, in ways you do not know. Yes, the very souls in purgatory are relieved of their pain by the power of this work. You yourself are cleansed and made virtuous by this work more than by any other. And yet it is the easiest work of all and the soonest completed, when a soul is helped by grace in the desire it feels; but otherwise it is hard, and you can do it only by miracle.

Do not give up, then, but labour at it till you feel desire. For the first time you do it, you will find only a darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing,[12] you do not know what, except that you feel in your will a naked purpose[13] towards God. Whatever you do, this darkness and this cloud are between you and your God, and hold you back from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason and from experiencing him in the sweetness of love in your feelings. And so prepare to remain in this darkness as long as

you can, always begging for him you love; for if you are ever to feel or see him, so far as is possible in this life, it must always be in this cloud and this darkness. And if you are willing to labour eagerly as I tell you, I trust in his mercy that you will reach your goal.

Chapter 4

But so that you shall not go wrong in this work of contemplation, and suppose it to be other than it is, I must tell you a little more about it as I see it.

This work does not demand a long time to be fully completed, as some people suppose, for it is the briefest of all imaginable actions. It is neither longer nor shorter than an instant[14] – an instant, which, as defined by expert scientists in the field of astronomy, is the smallest unit of time; it is so tiny that its small size makes it indivisible and almost beyond our understanding. This is the time of which it is written: 'All the time that is given you, it shall be asked of you how you have spent it.'[15] And it is reasonable that you should account for it; for it is exactly equivalent, neither longer nor shorter, to a single stirring within the principal active faculty of your soul, which is your will. For exactly as many stirrings of volition or desire can and do occur in one hour in your will as there are instants in one hour, neither more nor fewer. And if you were reformed by grace to the original state of the human soul,[16] as it was before sin, then, with the help of that grace, you would always be in control of every such stirring or stirrings; and so none would go astray, but they would all reach out towards the supreme goal of desire and the highest object of will, which is God.

For by circumscribing his Godhead he adapts himself exactly to our soul; and our soul is exactly adapted to him by the dignity of our creation in his image and likeness.[17] And he by himself alone, and none but he, is fully sufficient, and far more than fully, to satisfy the will and desire of our soul. And by means of this reforming grace our soul is made fully sufficient to grasp him in his entirety by love

– God, who is beyond the reach of all created intellectual faculties, such as those of angels and human souls. (I mean beyond the reach of their knowledge and not of their love, which is why in the present case I refer to intellectual faculties.)

Only see: all rational beings, angels and men, have in them, each individually, two principal active faculties, one a faculty of knowledge, and the second a faculty of love; and God, their maker, is forever beyond the reach of the first of these, the intellectual faculty; but by means of the second, the loving faculty, he can be fully grasped by each individual being, to such an extent that each single loving soul may, by virtue of love, embrace within itself him who is fully sufficient (and beyond comparison more than fully) to fill all the souls and angels that can ever exist. And this is the unending marvellous miracle of love, which will never be concluded; for God will always do it, and will never cease from doing it. Let whoever has grace to see this, see it, for to experience this is unending bliss, and to lack it is unending pain.[18]

Then, given that by nature we cannot exist without these stirrings of the will, anyone who was restored by grace to be in continuous control of them would never be without some taste of eternal sweetness on earth, or without complete enjoyment of it in heaven. So do not be surprised if I urge you to this work; for, as you will hear later, this is the work in which humanity would have continued if we had never sinned, and it is the work for which we were made and everything was made for us to help and further us in it, and by it we shall once more be restored. And for want of this work, we fall deeper and deeper into sin, and further and further from God; and simply by perseverance and continual activity in it, and nothing else, we always rise higher and higher from sin, and nearer and nearer to God.

And so take good care of time and how you spend it, for nothing is more precious than time.[19] In one little time, however little it is, heaven may be won and lost. A sign that time is precious is that God, the giver of time, never gives two times together, but always

one time after another. And he does this because he does not wish to reverse the order or regular course of causes in his creation. For time is made for man, and not man for time.[20] In his disposition of time, therefore, God, the ruler of nature, will not diverge from the natural movement of the human soul, which consists of just one stirring at a time. Thus we shall not be able to claim forgiveness of God at the Last Judgement, when we are called to give account of the spending of time, by saying, 'You give two times at once, and I have only one stirring of soul at a time'.

But now you say sadly, 'How shall I manage? And since what you are saying is true, how shall I give account of each separate moment, I who, now aged twenty-four, never before this day took heed of time? You know well from the very reasoning of what you have just written that if I should now wish to put things right, it is impossible for me, in the order of nature or of ordinary grace, to control or make amends for any times but those that are yet to come. And what is more, I know from experience itself that my overwhelming weakness and sluggishness of spirit will mean that I shall never be able to attend to one future time in a hundred; so that I am completely confounded by these arguments. Help me now, for the love of Jesus!'

You did well to say 'for the love of Jesus', for in the love of Jesus shall be your help. Love is so great a power that it makes all possessions common.[21] Love Jesus, therefore, and all that he has is yours. As God he is the maker and giver of time; as Man he is the true governor of time; and as God and Man together he is the truest judge and auditor of the spending of time. So bind yourself to him in love and faith, and then, by means of that bond, you will be an equal partner with him and with all who are thus bound to him by love – that is, with our Lady St Mary, who was full of all grace in keeping time,[22] with all the angels in heaven who may never waste time, and with all the saints in heaven and on earth who by the grace of Jesus keep exact account of time by means of love.

This is where comfort is to be found: interpret it correctly and seize some profit from it. I warn you, though, of one thing above all: I cannot see who can truly claim this partnership with Jesus and his just mother, his holy angels and his saints, but someone who does all he can, aided by grace, to attend to time, so that he can be seen to benefit the company on his own part, little though that is, just as all the others do on their part.

And so attend to this work of contemplation and the marvellous way it operates within your soul. For, truly understood, it is just a sudden and as it were unforeseen stirring, springing swiftly to God like a spark from a coal. And it is marvellous how many stirrings can occur in an hour in a soul that is given to this work. And yet, in just one of all these stirrings, it can happen that you forget the whole created world, suddenly and completely. But straight after each stirring, because of the flesh's corruption, the soul falls back down into some thought or action, done or not done. But what of that? For straight afterwards it rises again as suddenly as it did before.

Here is how to understand in brief the nature of this work, and to recognize clearly that it is far from any fantasy, false imagining, or strange opinion; for these are produced not by any such devout and humble blind stirring of love, but by a proud, ingenious and fanciful intellect. Such a proud, ingenious intellect must always be overcome and firmly trodden underfoot if the work of contemplation is to be truly undertaken in purity of spirit.

For those who hear reading or discussion about this work, and suppose that it can or should be achieved by labour of the intellect – and so they sit and search their intellects for ways to do it, and perhaps ingeniously torment their imaginations against the course of nature, and devise a kind of activity that is neither bodily nor spiritual – truly, any such person, whoever he may be, is dangerously deceived. Indeed, unless God of his great goodness should miraculously take mercy on him, and make him give up this activity quickly and turn humbly to the advice of experienced contemplatives, he will fall either into attacks of frenzy or into other

kinds of trouble, spiritual sins and diabolic deceptions, through which he could easily be lost, life and soul, without end. And so for the love of God take care in this work, and do not struggle in your intellect or imagination in any way. For I tell you truly, it cannot be achieved by that kind of struggle; so give it up and do not attempt it.

Do not suppose, because I call it a darkness or a cloud, that it is a cloud condensed out of the vapours that float in the air, or a darkness like that in your house at night when your candle is out. By intellectual ingenuity you can imagine such a darkness or cloud brought before your eyes on the brightest day of summer, just as, conversely, in the darkest night of winter you can imagine a clear shining light. Give up such errors; that is not what I mean. For when I say ‘darkness’ I mean an absence of knowing, in the sense that everything you do not know, or have forgotten, is dark to you, because you cannot see it with your mind’s eye. And for this reason it is not called a cloud in the air but a cloud of unknowing that is between you and your God.

Chapter 5

And if you should ever reach this cloud, and dwell and work in it as I am telling you, then, just as this cloud of unknowing is above you, between you and your God, so you will need to put a cloud of forgetting beneath you, between you and everything that was ever created. Perhaps it will seem to you that you are far distant from God because the cloud of unknowing is between you and him, but in fact, rightly understood, you are much further from him when you have no cloud of forgetting between you and everything that was ever created. Whenever I say 'everything that was ever created', I mean not only the created things themselves but all they do and all their attributes. I do not except anything created, whether bodily or spiritual beings, nor any act or attribute of any such being, whether good or evil; but, in brief, they should all be hidden in this way under the cloud of forgetting.

For though it may sometimes be very beneficial to think of particular attributes and acts of specific created beings, it is nevertheless of little or no benefit in this work of contemplation. Consciousness or recollection of anything that God ever created, and equally of any such creature's acts, is a kind of spiritual sight; for the eye of your soul is open to it and fixed upon it, as the eye of an archer is on the target he is aiming at. And I tell you one thing, that everything you are thinking of is above you while you are thinking of it, and between you and your God. And you are further from God to the extent that anything is in your mind but God alone.

Yes, and if it is not discourteous and unseemly to say so, in this work of contemplation it is of little or no benefit to think of God's kindness or excellence, or our Lady, or the saints or angels in heaven, or even the joys of heaven – that is, with particular

attention to them, as if by meditating on them you would sustain and strengthen your purpose. I believe that in these circumstances, in this work, it cannot be so at all. For, good though it may be to think of God's acts of kindness, and to love and praise him for them, it is far better to think of his naked being,[23] and to love and praise him for himself.

Chapter 6

But now you ask me, ‘How am I to think of God himself, and what is he?’ And to this I can only answer, ‘I do not know’.

For with your question you have brought me into that very darkness and that very cloud of unknowing that I want you to be in yourself. By grace it is possible to have full knowledge of all other created things and their works, and indeed of the works of God himself, and to think clearly about them, but of God himself no one can think. And so I wish to give up everything that I can think, and choose as my love the one thing that I cannot think. For he can well be loved, but he cannot be thought. By love he can be grasped and held, but by thought neither grasped nor held. And therefore, though it may be good at times to think specifically of the kindness and excellence of God, and though this may be a light and a part of contemplation, all the same, in the work of contemplation itself, it must be cast down and covered with a cloud of forgetting. And you must step above it stoutly but deftly, with a devout and delightful stirring of love, and struggle to pierce that darkness above you; and beat on that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love, and do not give up, whatever happens.

Chapter 7

And if any thought rises up and keeps on wanting to force itself above you, between you and that darkness, and asks you, ‘What are you seeking, and what would you have?’, say that it is God you would have: ‘I want him, I seek him, and nothing but him.’ And if it asks you what that God is, say that it is God who made and redeemed you, and who has graciously called you to his love; and say that you have no understanding of him. And therefore say, ‘Get back down’, and tread the thought down firmly with a stirring of love, even though it seems to you most holy, and as though it would help you to seek God.

For perhaps it will bring to your mind various beautiful and wonderful instances of God’s kindness, and say that he is very sweet and loving, very gracious and merciful. And if you are willing to listen, it desires nothing better; for it will chatter more and more till at last it brings you lower, to remembrance of his Passion. And there it will let you see the wonderful kindness of God; and if you listen, it seeks nothing better. For soon after this it will let you see your old sinful way of life; and perhaps, as you see this and think about it, it will bring to mind some place where you used to live in the past. So that in the end, before you know it, you will be scattered, you do not know where. The cause of this scattering is that you first listened willingly to the thought, answered it, accepted it and let it work freely.

Yet, nevertheless, what it said was both good and holy – so holy, indeed, that a man or woman who hopes to achieve contemplation without first going through many such sweet meditations on their own sinfulness, the Passion, the kindness and great goodness and excellence of God, will certainly go wrong and fail in their purpose.

And yet, all the same, a person who has had long practice in these meditations must always leave them, and push them and hold them down, far beneath the cloud of forgetting, if he is ever to pierce the cloud of unknowing between him and his God.

Therefore, whenever you resolve to undertake this work of contemplation, and feel that by grace you are called by God, lift up your heart to God with a humble stirring of love. And think of God who made and redeemed you, and who has graciously called you to this work, and accept no other thought of God. And do not accept even these thoughts, unless you choose; for a naked intention directed to God is fully sufficient, without any other goal than himself.

If you want to have this intention wrapped and enfolded in one word, so that you can hold on to it better, take only a short word of one syllable; that is better than one of two syllables, for the shorter it is, the better it agrees with the work of the spirit. A word of this kind is the word GOD or the word LOVE. Choose whichever you wish, or another as you please, whichever you prefer of one syllable, and fasten this word to your heart, so that it never parts from it, whatever happens.

This word is to be your shield and spear, whether you ride in peace or in war. With this word you are to beat on the cloud and the darkness above you. With this word you are to hammer down every kind of thought beneath the cloud of forgetting; so if any thought forces itself on you to ask what you would have, answer it with no more than this one word. And if, in its great learning, it offers to expound that word and tell you its attributes, say that you wish to have it quite whole, and not analysed or explained. If you will hold firmly to this purpose, be sure that the thought will not stay. And why? Because you will not let it gratify itself with sweet meditations such as those mentioned earlier.

Chapter 8

But now you ask me, 'What is it, this thing that forces itself on me in the work of contemplation? And is it a good thing, or evil? If it is an evil thing,' you say, 'then I wonder why it will heighten devotion so greatly. For I sometimes find it a great comfort to listen to what it says. Sometimes I find it will make me weep bitterly for pity of Christ's Passion, and sometimes for my sinfulness, and for many other reasons that seem to me very holy and do me great good. And therefore it seems that it cannot in any way be evil. And if it is good, and does me so much good with its sweet sayings, then I wonder greatly why you tell me to push it down away from me, so far below the cloud of forgetting.'

Now this certainly seems to me a well-put question, and so I shall try to answer it with what little skill I can. First, when you ask me what it is, this thing that forces itself so hard upon you in the work of contemplation, offering to help you in it, I say that it is a clear and penetrating insight from your natural intelligence, imprinted upon your reason within your soul. And when you ask me whether it is good or evil, I say that it must always be good in its own nature, because it is a ray of God's likeness. But the use to which it is put may be either good or evil: good, when by grace it enables you to see your own sinfulness, the Passion, God's kindness and the wonders in both body and spirit that he performs through his creation (and then it is no wonder if it heightens your devotion as greatly as you say); but its use is evil when it is swollen with pride and with the ingenuity of great learning and bookish knowledge, as in the case of clerics, making them thrust themselves forward to be thought not humble scholars and masters of divinity or devotion, but proud scholars of the Devil and masters of vanity and falsehood.

And in other men or women, whether they live religious[24] or secular lives, the use and effect of this natural intelligence is evil when it is puffed up with proud and ingenious arguments about worldly matters and fleshly thoughts, coveting worldly honours, possession of wealth, empty pleasure, and the flattery of others.

When you ask me why you are to push it down below the cloud of forgetting, since it is true that it is good in its kind, and, moreover, when used well, it does you so much good and heightens your devotion so greatly, my answer is that you must clearly understand that there are two ways of life within the Church. One is active, and the other contemplative. The active is the lower, and the contemplative is the higher. Active life has two levels, a higher and a lower; and contemplative life also has two levels, a lower and a higher. And these two lives are so linked together that, though they differ in some respects, neither of them may be attained without some part of the other, because that which is the higher part of active life is at the same time the lower part of contemplative life. Thus you cannot be fully active unless you are partly contemplative, nor can you be fully contemplative (so far as that is possible on earth) unless you are partly active. The nature of active life is such that it both begins and ends in this life, but this is not so with contemplative life, for it begins in this life and will last without end, because the part that Mary[25] chose shall never be taken away. Active life is troubled and harassed about many things, but contemplative life sits at peace with one thing.

The lower part of active life consists of good and honourable corporal works of mercy[26] and charity. The higher part of active life and the lower part of contemplative life consists of good spiritual meditation and earnest thought – of one's own sinfulness, with sorrow and contrition; of the Passion of Christ and the sufferings of his servants, with pity and compassion; and of the wonderful gifts, kindness and works of God in all his creation, bodily and spiritual, with thanksgiving and praise. But the higher part of contemplation (so far as it is attainable on earth) rests entirely in this darkness and

in this cloud of unknowing, with a loving stirring and a blind attention only to the bare existence of God himself.

In the lower part of active life, you are outside yourself and beneath yourself. In the higher part of active life and the lower part of contemplative life, you are within yourself and level with yourself. But in the higher part of contemplative life, you are above yourself and below your God. You are above yourself, because you are determined to get by grace to where you cannot come by nature; that is to say, to be bound to God in spirit and in singleness of love and harmony of will.

Just as to human understanding it is impossible for someone to reach the higher part of active life without giving up the lower part for a time, so someone will not be able to reach the higher part of contemplative life without giving up the lower part for a time. And just as it is impermissible and a hindrance to someone sitting at his meditations to consider then the outward bodily actions that he has done or is going to do, however holy those actions might be in themselves, so it is certainly inappropriate and would equally hinder someone working in this darkness and this cloud of unknowing with an ardent stirring of love towards God for himself, if he were to let any thought or meditation of God's wonderful gifts, kindness, and works in any part of his creation, bodily or spiritual, rise up and thrust itself between him and his God, however holy, pleasant, or consoling those thoughts might be.

It is for this reason that I tell you to push down any such penetrating subtle thought and cover it with a thick cloud of forgetting, however holy it may be or however much it may promise to help you in your purpose. For love may reach God in this life, but knowledge may not. And the whole time that the soul dwells in this mortal body, the sharpness of our understanding is always mixed with some kind of mental image when it is directed towards spiritual things, but most especially towards God; and because of this our work of contemplation must be impure, and it would be very surprising if it did not lead us into great error.

Chapter 9

And so the sharp stirring of your understanding, which keeps on thrusting itself on you when you apply yourself to this blind work of contemplation, must always be forced down; and unless you force it down, it will force you down, and the outcome will be that when you most think you are dwelling in this darkness, and that nothing is in your mind but God alone, if you look truly you will find your mind not engaged in this darkness but in a clear sight of something lower than God. If so, then that thing is certainly above you for the time, and between you and your God. And so be determined to push down such clear sights, however holy or pleasing they may be.

For I tell you one thing: such a blind stirring of love towards God for himself, and such a secret thrust of love at this cloud of unknowing, is more beneficial to your soul's well-being, more valuable in itself, and more pleasing to God and to all the saints and angels in heaven – yes, and more helpful to all your friends, in body and spirit, living and dead[27] – and it would be better for you to have it and to feel it spiritually than to have the eye of your soul opened in contemplation or vision of all the angels or saints in heaven, or to hear all the joy and melody experienced by those in bliss.

Do not be surprised at this; because if you could once see it as clearly as you can by grace get to touch and feel it in this life, you would think as I say. You may be sure that no one will ever have such clear vision here on earth; but the feeling can be attained by grace when God grants it. And therefore lift up your love to that cloud; or rather, if I am to speak truly, let God draw your love up to that cloud, and try with the help of his grace to forget all other things.

For since a bare memory of anything below God, forcing itself on you without your will and knowledge, pushes you further from God than you would otherwise be, and hinders you, and makes you all the less able to experience in your feelings the fruit of his love, how far do you think a thought knowingly and voluntarily entertained will hinder you in your purpose? And since a thought of any particular saint or any pure spiritual matter will hinder you so greatly, how far do you suppose the thought of any person living in this sinful life, or of any kind of bodily or worldly matter, will hinder and hold you back in this work of contemplation?

I do not say that a mere unexpected thought of any good and pure spiritual matter below God, forcing itself on you without your will or knowledge, or else voluntarily entertained, upon consideration, to heighten your devotion, must be evil, even though it may hinder this kind of work. No, God forbid that you should so understand it. But I say that, though it may be good and holy, it still hinders you more than it helps while you are actually engaged in contemplation. For it is certain that someone who perfectly seeks God will not come to rest finally in the thought of any angel or saint in heaven.

Chapter 10

It is not the same with the memory of any man or woman living on earth, or of any bodily or worldly matter, whatever it may be. Because a mere unexpected thought of any of these, forcing itself on you without your will and knowledge, though it may not be a sin for which you are responsible – for it is the painful effect of original sin thrusting beyond your control, and you were cleansed of that sin itself by your baptism – still, if this unexpected stirring or thought is not soon beaten down, your bodily heart in its weakness will at once be gripped by it, with some kind of delight if it is something that pleases you or has previously pleased you, or with some kind of discontent if it is something that seems to do you harm or to have done so previously. In men and women living unregenerate lives, who are already in deadly sin, this grip is deadly; but in you and all others who have sincerely forsaken the world, such delight or discontent gripping the bodily heart is only a venial sin.[28] This is because, when you entered into the way of life you have undertaken, with the knowledge and advice of some prudent father,[29] your purpose was rooted and grounded in God. But if it should happen that this delight or discontent that grips the bodily heart is permitted to remain unreproved so long that at last it grips the spiritual heart (that is, the will) with its full consent, then it is a deadly sin.

This occurs when you, or any of those I refer to, willingly entertain thoughts of any man or woman living on earth, or of any other bodily or worldly matter, so that, if it is something that does you harm or has previously done so, there rises in you a passionate anger and desire for vengeance, which is called Wrath; or a fierce contempt and a kind of loathing of their person, accompanied by

critical and malevolent thoughts, which is called Envy;[30] or weariness and listlessness with any good activity, bodily or spiritual, which is called Sloth. And if it is something that pleases you or has pleased you previously, there rises in you an irresistible delight in thinking of it, whatever it may be, so that you linger in that thought, and finally bind your heart and will to it, and gratify your bodily heart with it, so that it seems to you for the moment that you desire no blessing but always to live in such peace and rest with the thing of which you are thinking. If this thought that you thus entertain, or else admit when it is suggested to you, and in which you linger with such delight, is of excellence of nature or knowledge, of grace or rank, of favour or beauty, then it is Pride. And if it is of any kind of worldly possession, wealth or property, or anything that one can have or be lord of, then it is Covetousness. If it is of delicious food and drink, or anything that gives pleasure to the taste, then it is Gluttony. And if it is of love or carnal pleasure, or any kind of flirtatious behaviour, sweet talk or flattery by any man or woman living on earth, or indeed by yourself, then it is Lechery.[31]

Chapter 11

I do not say this because I believe that you, or anyone else I am referring to, are guilty and burdened with sins of this kind, but because I want you to weigh every thought and stirring according to its own nature, and to make a serious effort to destroy the first stirring and thought of matters in which you might sin in this way. For I tell you one thing: anyone, whoever he may be, who gives little weight or importance to the first thought – yes, even if it is not sinful in itself – will not avoid carelessness about venial sin. In this mortal life, venial sin cannot be completely avoided by anyone; but carelessness about venial sin must always be avoided by all those who truly pursue perfection, or else it will be no surprise if they soon fall into deadly sin.

Chapter 12

So, if you wish to stand and not fall, never relax your purpose, but beat continually upon this cloud of unknowing that is between you and your God with a sharp dart of longing love. Avoid thinking about anything below God; and do not give up, whatever happens. For this alone is the work that by itself destroys the ground and root of sin. However much you fasted, however long you stayed awake, however early you rose, however hard the bed you lay on, however harsh the garment you wore,[32] yes, and, were it permissible (as it is not), if you should put out your eyes, cut the tongue out of your mouth, stop up your ears and nose as firmly as possible, even if you should slice off your private parts and cause your body all the pain you could think of, none of this would help you at all. The stirring and rising of sin will still be in you.[33]

Yes, and there is more! However much you weep for sorrow of your sins or of Christ's Passion, and however much you think of the joys of heaven, what can it do for you? Certainly it will bring you much good, much help, much benefit, and much grace; but, unaided, it does and can do little in comparison with this blind movement of love. That by itself is Mary's best part,[34] without any other devotions. Without it, they bring little or no benefit. It not only destroys the ground and root of sin, so far as that is possible on earth, it also brings virtues. For, truly understood, all virtues will be perceived and felt to be included within it subtly and completely, without any contamination of its purpose. And however many virtues someone has without it, they are all contaminated by some distorted purpose, which makes them imperfect.

For virtue is nothing but an ordered and controlled love, simply directed towards God for himself. He in himself is the pure goal of

all virtues, so that if anyone is moved to any virtue by some other goal mixed with God, even if God is the chief goal, that virtue is then imperfect. This can be exemplified by letting one virtue or two stand in place of all the others. And the two virtues can well be humility and charity,[35] for anyone who could acquire these two would clearly need no others, for he would have them all.

Chapter 13

Now let us first consider the virtue of humility, and how it is imperfect when its goal is anything else mixed with God (even if God is the chief goal), and how it is perfect when its goal is God alone. And if the matter is to be clearly seen and understood, first we must know what humility is in itself, and then we can better understand in truth of spirit what its cause is.

Humility in itself is nothing but a true knowledge and feeling of oneself as one is; for certainly anyone who could truly see and feel himself as he is would be truly humble. There are two reasons for humility, and they are as follows. One is humanity's impurity, wretchedness and weakness, into which we have fallen by sin, and which we must always feel to some degree while we live on earth, however holy we may be. The second is the superabundant love and excellence of God in himself, at the sight of which all nature trembles, all scholars are fools, and all saints and angels are blind; so that, were it not that through the wisdom of his Godhead he made their vision proportionate to their capacity in nature and in grace, I tremble to say what would become of them.

This second reason is perfect, because it will last eternally; the first reason is imperfect, not only because it will cease at the end of this life, but also because it may often happen that a soul in this mortal body will find its longing so heightened through the abundance of grace that, as often and as long as God deigns to bring it about, the soul will suddenly and completely lose and forget all knowledge and feeling of its existence, paying no attention to whether it has been holy or wretched; but whether this happens often or seldom to a soul in this state, I believe that it lasts only a very short time. During this time it is made perfectly humble, for it knows and feels no

reason but the chief one; and whenever it knows and feels the other reason associated with it, even if God is the chief reason, it is imperfect humility. It is good all the same, and must always be had; and God forbid that you should understand it in any other way than I am saying.

Chapter 14

For even though I call it imperfect humility, still I had rather have a true knowledge and feeling of myself as I am, and I believe this alone would sooner bring me to the perfect reason for humility, than it would if all the saints and angels in heaven, and all the men and women alive within the Church on earth, of all ranks, religious or secular, were jointly set to do nothing but pray to God that I should achieve perfect humility. Yes, and without this self-knowledge it is impossible for a sinner to achieve the perfect virtue of humility, or to keep it when he has achieved it.

Struggle and sweat, then, as much as you can and may, to achieve a true knowledge and feeling of yourself as you are; and then I believe that soon afterwards you will have a true knowledge and feeling of God as he is – not as he is in himself, for no one but himself can do that, nor yet as you will know him when you are in heaven, both body and soul together, but as he is accessible and as he deigns to be known and experienced by a humble soul living in this mortal body.

Do not think, because I mention two reasons for humility, one perfect and another imperfect, that I therefore want you to give up working towards imperfect humility and apply yourself wholly to achieving perfect humility. No, indeed, I believe you would never succeed in that way. But I am doing what I do because I hope to tell you and show you how this spiritual exercise excels all other exercises, spiritual or bodily, that one can or may engage in by grace – how a secret thrust of love, directed in purity of spirit at this dark cloud of unknowing between you and your God, subtly and completely contains within it the perfect virtue of humility, without any particular or distinct concern for anything below God – and

because I want you to know what perfect humility is, and to set it as a mark before the love of your heart, and to do this for yourself and for me; and because I want this knowledge to make you more humble.

For it often happens, I think, that lack of knowledge causes great pride. For perhaps, if you did not know what perfect humility is, you would suppose, when you had a little knowledge and awareness of what I call imperfect humility, that you were on the verge of achieving perfect humility; and thus you would deceive yourself, and would suppose you were entirely humble, when you were enveloped in foul stinking pride. And so try to work towards perfect humility, for its nature is such that anyone who has it will not sin while he has it, nor sin greatly afterwards.

Chapter 15

Trust steadfastly that there is such a thing as the perfect humility of which I am speaking, and that through grace it may be achieved in this life. I say this to confute the error of those who claim that there is no more perfect reason for humility than what arises from the remembrance of our wretchedness and the sins we have committed.

I readily grant that to those who have been habitually sinful, as I have been and am myself, the most necessary and beneficial cause of humility is to be humbled by the remembrance of our wretchedness and the sins we have committed, until the time when our consciences and our spiritual directors bear witness that the thick rust of our sin is largely rubbed away.

But for others, innocents as it were, who never committed deadly sin deliberately and with a fixed will, but only through weakness and ignorance, and who commit themselves to be contemplatives – and for the two of us, if our directors and our consciences testify to our faithful reformation through contrition and confession and satisfaction[36] according to the established practices and laws of the universal Church, and if too we feel ourselves moved and summoned by grace to be contemplatives – there is another cause for humility, as far above this as the way of life of our Lady St Mary is above that of the most sinful penitent in Holy Church, or the way of life of Christ is above that of any other person on earth, or the way of life of an angel in heaven, who never felt or shall feel moral weakness, is above that of the weakest man living in this world.

For suppose there were no perfect cause for humility other than the sight and feeling of our sinfulness: I should like to know from those who say this what cause for humility exists for those in whom there will never be sinfulness or temptation to sin and who will

therefore never see or feel it – as is the case with our Lord Jesus Christ, our Lady St Mary, and all the saints and angels in heaven. To this perfection and all others our Lord Jesus Christ calls us himself in the Gospel, when he commands that we should be perfect by grace as he is himself by nature.[37]

Chapter 16

Let no one think it presumptuous if the most wretched sinner on earth, after he has properly reformed himself, and has felt himself stirred to the life that is called contemplative, with the assent of his director and his conscience, dares to take upon him to offer a humble stirring of love to his God, secretly thrusting at the cloud of unknowing between him and his God. When our Lord said to Mary, as the representative of all sinners who are called to the contemplative life, 'Thy sins are forgiven thee',[38] it was not because of her great sorrow, nor because of her consciousness of her sins, nor again because of the humility that arose merely from the consideration of her sinfulness. Why then? Truly, it was because she loved greatly.[39] Here can be seen what a secret thrust of love may obtain from our Lord, beyond all other actions that can be imagined.

I fully admit that she had very great sorrow, and wept very bitterly for her sins, and was very greatly humbled by the remembrance of her sinfulness. And we too, who have been wretches and habitual sinners throughout our lives, should express intense and extreme sorrow for our sins, and be very greatly humbled by the remembrance of our sinfulness. Yes, but how? Truly, as Mary did. Though she could not cease to feel deep, heartfelt sorrow for her sins – because throughout her life she had them with her wherever she went, as if in a burden bound up together and secretly stored in the depth of her heart, so that they could never be forgotten – nevertheless it may be said (and Scripture confirms it) that she had a more heartfelt sorrow and a more grievous desire, and she sighed more deeply and pined more painfully, yes, almost to the death, for lack of love (although she had abundance of love) than she did for any consciousness of her sins. And do not marvel at this, for it is the

nature of a true lover that the more he loves, the more he longs to love.

And yet she knew well and felt within herself with steadfast certainty that she was the foulest of all wretches, and that her sins had divided her from her God whom she loved so much; and also that they were in large part the reason why she pined in sickness for lack of love. But what of that? Did she therefore come down from the height of desire into the depth of her sinful life, and search in the foul stinking fen and dunghill of her sins, sorting through them one by one in every detail, and sorrowing and weeping for each of them separately? No, certainly, she did not. And why? Because God let her know by his inward grace in her soul that in that way she would never succeed. For in that way she was more likely to have aroused in herself the possibility of sinning again than to have obtained complete forgiveness of all her sins.

And so she hung her love and her longing desire on this cloud of unknowing, and taught herself to love something that in this life she could not see clearly in her reason by the light of understanding, nor yet feel truly in her emotions in the sweetness of love, to such an extent that she often had little specific recollection whether she had ever been a sinner or not. Yes, and very often I believe she was so deeply moved by love of his Godhead that she paid only the smallest regard to the beauty of his precious and blessed body,[40] that beloved body in which he dwelt, speaking and preaching to her; nor did she pay regard to anything else, bodily or spiritual. That this is true appears from the Gospel.

Chapter 17

It is written in the Gospel of St Luke that when our Lord was in the house of Martha, while Martha was busying herself about the preparation of his food, her sister Mary was sitting at his feet.[41] Listening to his words, she paid no attention to her sister's busy service, even though that service was very good and very holy (for it is the first part of active life); nor yet to the excellence of his blessed body, nor to the sweet voice and words belonging to his Manhood, even though that was better and holier (for it is the second part of active life and the first of contemplative life); but she attended only to the supreme wisdom of his Godhead cloaked within the dark words of his Manhood – to that she attended with all the love of her heart. From that she would not be diverted by anything she saw or heard spoken or done around her, but sat with her body quite still, with many sweet secret and eager thrusts of love into that high cloud of unknowing between her and her God.

For I tell you one thing, that there never has been and never shall be any living creature, however pure, raised to whatever height of ecstasy[42] in contemplation and love of the Godhead, who does not always have a high and wonderful cloud of unknowing between him and his God. It was in this cloud that Mary was busy with many secret thrusts of love. And why? Because this was the best and holiest part of contemplation that can be achieved in this life; and from this part she would not be diverted by anything – so that when Martha complained to our Lord and asked him to tell her sister to get up and help her, and not let her go on working and struggling by herself, Mary sat completely still and did not answer a word, and did not even look resentfully at her sister, whatever criticism she might make. And no wonder, for she had other work to do, of which

Martha knew nothing, and therefore she had no leisure to listen to her or respond to her criticism.

Friend, all the actions, words and looks that passed between our Lord and these two sisters serve as a lesson to all actives and contemplatives that have lived within the Church since then and shall do until the Day of Judgement. For by Mary all contemplatives are understood, so that they should model their way of life on hers; and similarly by Martha all actives, with the same consequent resemblance.

Chapter 18

And just as Martha complained about her sister Mary, so to this very day all actives criticize contemplatives. For if there is a man or woman in any group on earth, with no exceptions, whether a religious order or a group of lay people, and that man or woman, whichever it may be, feels stirred by grace and by his spiritual adviser to abandon all outward occupation and commit himself totally to live the contemplative life according to his ability and conscience, with his adviser's agreement, immediately the brothers and sisters of any such people, and all their closest friends, along with many others who do not know their motives or the way of life to which they are committing themselves, will turn upon them in a great spirit of criticism, and tell them harshly that what they are doing is nothing. And immediately they will gather up many untrue stories (and many true ones, too) about the fall of men and women who have devoted themselves to this way of life in the past; and never a good story of those who stand fast.

I admit that many of those who appear to have forsaken the world do fall and have fallen; and when they should have become God's servants and his contemplatives, because they would not be governed by true spiritual advice, they have become the Devil's servants and his contemplatives, and they turn either into hypocrites or into heretics, or they fall into madness and many other troubles, to the disgrace of Holy Church. And of these I refrain from speaking at this moment, so as not to interrupt our subject matter; but nevertheless later, when God permits and if it should be necessary, something may be said of their natures and their reason for falling;[43] and so no more of them at this moment, but let us proceed.

Chapter 19

Some might think that I pay little respect to Martha, that special saint, because I compare her words in criticism of her sister to the words of these worldly men, or theirs to hers. Truly I intend no disrespect to her or to them; and God forbid that in this work I should say anything that might be taken as reproof of any of God's servants, of whatever rank, and particularly of a special saint of his. For it seems to me that her criticism should very readily be pardoned, considering the time and manner in which she spoke it. For her ignorance was the cause of what she said – and no wonder if at the time she did not know how Mary was occupied, for I suppose that before then she had heard little of such perfection. And what she said, too, was said courteously and in few words; and so she should always be pardoned.

And so it seems to me that, even though they say what they say rudely, men and women who live an active life in the world should also be readily pardoned for the critical words mentioned above, if their ignorance is taken into account. For just as Martha knew very little of what her sister Mary was doing when she complained about her to our Lord, similarly these people in our time know little or nothing of what young disciples of God intend when they set themselves apart from worldly concerns and aim to be God's special servants in holiness and righteousness of spirit. And if they knew, truly I dare say they would neither do nor say as they do. So it seems to me that they should always be pardoned, because they know of no better way of life than the one they follow themselves. Also, when I consider the innumerable faults of word and deed that I myself have committed in the past out of lack of knowledge, it seems that if I wish to be pardoned by God for my ignorant faults I should always charitably and mercifully pardon the ignorant words

and deeds of others; otherwise I certainly do not do to others as I would have others do to me.

Chapter 20

Thus, as I see it, those who commit themselves to be contemplatives should not only pardon active persons for their critical words, they should be so engaged in spirit that they ought to pay little or no attention to what people have done or said about them. That was what Mary, the model for all of us, did when her sister Martha complained to our Lord. And if we will truly do as she did, our Lord will treat us now as he treated Mary then.

And how was that? Like this: though our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, to whom no secret thing is hidden, was called on as judge by Martha to tell Mary to get up and help her serve him, yet, because he saw that Mary was passionately engaged in spirit with the love of his Godhead, he answered courteously, and in a way that was appropriate from a rational point of view, on her behalf – for she was unwilling to stop loving him in order to excuse herself. And how did he answer? Not only as a judge, certainly, as Martha invoked him, but as an advocate he defended in legal terms her who loved him, and said, 'Martha, Martha'. It was expedient to repeat her name twice, because he wanted her to hear him and pay attention to his words. 'You are full of care,' he said, 'and troubled about many things.'[44] For those who are actives must always be concerned and occupied with many and various things, first to provide for their own needs and then in deeds of mercy towards their fellow Christians, as charity requires. And he said this to Martha, because he wanted to let her know that her activity was good and beneficial for her salvation. But so that she should not think it was the best of all possible human works, he added, 'But one thing is necessary'.[45]

And what is that one thing? Surely that, above all other human concerns, bodily or spiritual, God alone should be loved and praised. And so that Martha should not think she could both love and praise God above all other concerns, bodily or spiritual, while at the same time being concerned with the necessities of this life, and so as to free her from doubt as to whether she could perfectly serve God in both bodily and spiritual matters at the same time – imperfectly she could, but not perfectly – he added that Mary had chosen the best part, which would never be taken away from her. For the perfect stirring of love that begins on earth is of a piece with that which will last without end in the bliss of heaven, for they are one and the same.

Chapter 21

What is the meaning of ‘Mary has chosen the best’? Wherever the best is set down or specified, two other things are prerequisites, a good and a better, in order that it may be the best and the third in number.[46] But what are these three good things, of which Mary chose the best? They are not three ways of life, for Holy Church takes account only of two – active life and contemplative life – and in the story of this Gospel these two are allegorically signified by the two sisters, Martha and Mary: by Martha the active life, by Mary the contemplative. Outside one of these two lives no one can be saved; and where there are no more than two, no one can choose the best.

But though there are only two lives, nevertheless in these two lives there are three parts, each better than the last. These three have been assigned their specific places, each one individually, in what has been written above. For, as stated above,[47] the first part consists of good and honourable bodily works of mercy and charity, and this is the first level of active life, as has been stated. The second part of these two lives consists of good spiritual meditations on one’s own wretchedness, the Passion of Christ, and the joys of heaven. The first part is good and this part is better, for this is the second level of active life and the first of contemplative life. In this part contemplative life and active life are linked together in spiritual kinship and made sisters, on the model of Martha and Mary. An active may come this high into contemplation and no higher, except very rarely and by special grace. A contemplative may come this low towards active life and no lower, except very rarely and in great necessity.

The third part of these two lives dwells in this dark cloud of unknowing, with many secret thrusts of love towards God alone.

The first part is good, the second is better, but the third is best of all. This is Mary's best part. For this reason it is to be clearly recognized that our Lord did not say, 'Mary has chosen the best life', for there are only two lives, and no one can choose the best of two. But of these two lives he said, 'Mary has chosen the best part, which shall never be taken away from her'.[48] Though the first part and the second are both good and holy, they end with this life; for in the other life there will be no need, as now, to perform the works of mercy, or to weep for our wretchedness or for the Passion of Christ. For then no one will be able to hunger or thirst, as now, or to die for cold, or be sick, or homeless, or in prison, and no one will need burying, for then no one will be able to die. But let the third part that Mary chose be chosen by anyone called by grace to choose it; or, to put it more accurately, let anyone who is chosen for it by God readily rely on it, for it shall never be taken away; it may begin here, but it will last without end.

Therefore let the voice of our Lord call to these actives, as if he spoke on our behalf to them now as he did on Mary's behalf to Martha then, 'Martha, Martha!' 'Actives, actives! be as busy as you can in the first and second parts, now in one and now in the other, and, if it pleases you greatly and you feel yourselves drawn to it, be busy in both bodily. But do not concern yourselves with contemplatives: you do not know what is wrong with them. Let them sit in their rest and ease with Mary's third and best part.'[49]

Chapter 22[50]

The love between our Lord and Mary was sweet. She had much love for him; he had much more for her. Anyone desiring to see plainly all the relations between him and her (not as might be repeated by a mere gossip, but as testified by the history recorded in the Gospel, something that cannot possibly be false) would find that she was so deeply committed to loving him that nothing beneath him could please her or keep her heart from him. This is the same Mary who, when she sought him at the sepulchre, weeping, would not be comforted by an angel.[51] For when they spoke to her so sweetly and lovingly, and said, 'Do not weep, Mary, for our Lord, whom you are seeking, is risen, and you shall have him and see him fully alive among his disciples in Galilee, as he promised,' she would not stop on their account, because it seemed to her that anyone who was truly seeking the king of angels would not stop for angels.

What more? Certainly, anyone who carefully studies the Gospel history will find many marvellous details about her perfect love written as a model for us, and exactly corresponding to what is taught in this book, as if they had been arranged and written down for that purpose – and indeed so they were, if rightly understood.

And if you want to see what is written in the Gospel about the wonderful and special love that our Lord had for her, as the representative of all habitual sinners who are truly converted and called to the grace of contemplation, you will find that our Lord would not permit any man or woman, no, not even her own sister, to speak a word against her, without responding on her behalf himself. Yes, and more than that, he rebuked Simon the leper in his

own house because he thought ill of her.[52] This was great love; this was surpassing love.

Chapter 23

Truly, if we gladly conform our love and way of life to Mary's love and way of life, so far as we can by grace and counsel, it cannot be doubted that he will now answer similarly in spirit on our behalf every day, in the secret hearts of all those who either say or think ill of us. I do not deny that some people will always say or think some ill of us as long as we live under the burden of earthly life, as they did with Mary. But I say that if we pay no more attention to their words or thoughts than she did, and no more abandon our secret spiritual work, then our Lord will answer them in spirit and, if those who say and think such things are redeemable, within a few days they will be ashamed of their words and thoughts.

And as he will answer on our behalf in spirit, so he will move others in spirit to give us the necessities of this life, such as food and clothes and everything else, if he sees that we are unwilling to leave the work of loving him in order to concern ourselves with such things. I say this to confute the mistaken view of those who claim that it is not permissible to commit oneself to serve God in the contemplative life unless one is sure of bodily necessities beforehand.[53] They say that God sends the cow, but not by the horn;[54] and truly they say wrong of God, as they well know. For, whoever you may be who truly turn from the world to God, trust faithfully that, without any concern on your part, God will send you one of two things: either abundance of necessities, or the strength of body and endurance of spirit to suffer need. Why should you care which of these you have? – because for true contemplatives it is all the same. And if anyone doubts this, either the Devil is in his breast and robs him of faith, or else, however ingeniously he argues, or

whatever holy objections he puts forward, he has not yet truly turned to God as he should, whoever he may be.

And so, if you are committed to the contemplative life as Mary was, choose to be humbled by the wonderful height and excellence of God, who is perfect, rather than by your own sinfulness, which is imperfect: that is to say, see that you give special regard to God's excellence rather than your own sinfulness. For to those who have perfect humility, nothing shall be lacking, either in body or in spirit; because they have God, in whom is all plenty; and whoever has him – and that is the lesson of this book – needs nothing else in this life.

Chapter 24

What has been said of humility – how it is subtly and completely contained within this little blind thrust of love when it is beating upon the dark cloud of unknowing, with everything else thrust down and forgotten – should also be understood of all other virtues, and especially of charity. For you should understand that charity means nothing but to love God for himself above all created beings, and to love other human beings equally with yourself for God's sake. It appears very clearly that in this work of contemplation God is loved for himself and above all created beings; for, as was said previously, the substance of contemplation is nothing but a bare intention directed towards God for himself. I call it a bare intention because in this work an apprentice to perfection asks neither release from pain nor increase of reward nor, in a word, anything but God himself, so that he neither cares nor considers whether he is in pain or in bliss, so long as the will of the one he loves is fulfilled. And so it is evident that in this work God is loved for himself and above all created beings, for while engaged in contemplation a perfect worker cannot allow thoughts even of the holiest being that God ever made to enter his mind.

And it appears from experience that in this way the second and lower branch of charity, towards your fellow Christians, is truly and completely fulfilled. A perfect worker in contemplation has no regard to any specific person for his own sake, whether kin or stranger, friend or foe; for all alike seem kin to him, and none seems a stranger. All seem his friends, and none his enemies, so that for him all those who torment him and cause him distress on earth are his particular friends, and he feels moved to desire as much good for them as he would for the closest friend he has.

Chapter 25

I do not say that in this work of contemplation he should have a special regard for anyone on earth, whether friend or foe, kin or stranger. That cannot be if this work is to be perfectly performed, as it is when everything below God is forgotten, as this work requires. But I say that by means of this work he will be made so virtuous and so charitable that afterwards, when he descends to converse with or pray for his fellow Christians, his will shall be as specifically directed to his foe as to his friend, to a stranger as to his kin – yes, and sometimes more to his foe than to his friend. (I do not mean that he descends from contemplation entirely, for that may not be without great sin, but from the height of contemplation, which it is beneficial and necessary to do on occasion, as charity requires.)

In the work of contemplation, however, he has no leisure to consider who is his friend or his foe, his kin or a stranger. I do not deny that at times, indeed very often, he will feel a more intimate affection for one, or two, or three, than for all others; that can legitimately happen for many reasons, as charity requires. Christ felt such an intimate affection for John, and for Mary,[55] and for Peter, more than for many others. But I say that during the work of contemplation all must be equally intimate to him, for he will be aware of no cause of love but God alone, so that all will be loved fully and nakedly for God's sake, and as well as he loves himself.

As all men were lost with Adam, and all men who bear witness in their works to their desire for salvation are and will be saved by sole virtue of Christ's Passion, so – not in the same way, yet as it were in the same way – a soul that is perfectly disposed to this work and thus united with God in spirit, as experience of this work reveals, does all that it can to make all men as perfect in this work as it is

itself. For just as, if one part of our body feels pain, all the other parts are tormented and distressed by it, or if one part feels well, all the remainder are comforted by it, so it is spiritually with all the parts of Holy Church. For Christ is our head and we are the limbs,[56] if we are in charity; and anyone who wishes to be a perfect disciple of our Lord needs to stretch up his spirit in this work for the salvation of all his brothers and sisters in nature, as our Lord stretched out his body on the cross. And how? Not for his friends and his kin and those he loves most intimately, but for all humanity in general, without special regard to one rather than another. For all who desire to give up sin and ask for mercy will be saved by virtue of Christ's Passion.

What has been said of humility and charity is also to be understood of all other virtues, for they are all subtly contained within this little thrust of love that was mentioned previously.

Chapter 26

And therefore labour hard for a while, beating upon this high cloud of unknowing, and then rest. Anyone who habitually practises this work will unquestionably find it laborious, yes, very laborious indeed, unless he receives special grace, or else has been practising it for a long time. But I ask you, what is it that is laborious? Certainly not that devout stirring of love that is continually produced in his will, not by himself but by the hand of almighty God, who is always ready to bring about this work in every soul that inclines to it and that does all it can to prepare itself for it, and has been doing so for a long time. Then what is it that is laborious, I beg you? Why, the labour is all in treading down the thought of all beings that God ever created, and in keeping them beneath the cloud of forgetting mentioned earlier. This is all that is laborious, for this is the work that human beings must do, with the help of grace. And the other mentioned above – that is, the stirring of love – is the work of God alone. So press on with your work, and I promise you for certain that there will be no failing on his part.

Press on hard then; let us see how you manage. Do you not see how he is standing and waiting for you? For shame! work hard only a little while, and the greatness and difficulty of this labour will soon be eased. For though it may be hard and rigorous at first, when you have no devotion, later, when you have devotion, what was very hard before will be made very restful and very easy for you, and you will feel either little effort or none at all. For then God will sometimes do all the work himself; but not always, and never for long at a stretch, only when he pleases and as he pleases. And then you will find it pleasant to let him have his own way.

Then perhaps he will at times send out a beam of spiritual light, piercing this cloud of unknowing that is between you and him, and show you some of his mysteries, of which human beings are not permitted or able to speak. Then you will sense your feelings aflame with the fire of his love, far more than I can, may, or will tell you at this time. For of the work that belongs to God alone I dare not take it upon me to speak with my blabbering fleshly tongue; and, to put it briefly, even though I dared, I would not. But of the work that belongs to human beings, when they feel themselves moved and aided by grace, I am glad to tell you; for that is less dangerous to speak of than the other.

Chapter 27

First and foremost, I want to tell you who should engage in this work of contemplation, and when, and by what means, and what moderation[57] you should use in it. If you ask me who should work in this way, I answer: all who have sincerely forsaken the world, and who then commit themselves not to active life but to the way of life that is called contemplative. All these should engage in this work by grace, whoever they may be, whether or not they have been habitual sinners.

Chapter 28

Then if you ask me when they should engage in this work of contemplation, my answer is this. I say, not before they have cleansed their consciences of all the particular sinful deeds they have previously committed, according to the accepted requirements of Holy Church.

For in contemplation a soul dries up within itself the whole root and ground of sin that will always remain in it after even the most thorough confession. So anyone who wishes to undertake this work must first cleanse his conscience; and then, after he has done all he can according to the rules of penance, he should apply himself, boldly yet humbly, to contemplation. And he should think that he has been kept from it for too long, for this is the work at which a soul would toil all its lifetime if it had never committed deadly sin.

And while a soul is dwelling in this mortal flesh, it will always see and feel this burdensome cloud of unknowing between it and God. And not only that, but as the penalty of original sin one will always see and feel that some of the beings created by God, or some of their works, keep on pressing into consciousness between oneself and God. And this is the just judgement of God, for when man ruled over all other creatures as their sovereign lord he willingly made himself subservient to the impulses of his subjects,[58] disregarding the command of God his maker; and so afterwards, when he wishes to obey God's command, he sees and feels that all the creatures that should be below him are thrusting proudly above him, between him and his God.

Chapter 29

And so anyone who longs to regain the purity that he lost through sin, and to win that well-being where all woe is absent, must labour patiently in this work, and endure the pain it brings, whoever he may be, whether he has been a habitual sinner or not. Everyone finds this work laborious, both sinners and innocents who have never sinned greatly; but those who have been sinners find it far more laborious than those who have not – and with good reason. All the same, it frequently happens that some who have been hideous and habitual sinners arrive sooner at the perfection of this work than those who have not; and this is a merciful miracle of our Lord, who thus grants his special grace to arouse the whole world's wonder. I truly believe that on the Day of Judgement darkness will be dispelled: God and all his gifts will be seen clearly, and some who are now despised and unvalued as common sinners, and perhaps some who now *are* hideous sinners, will sit in glory with saints in God's sight; while some of those who now seem very holy and are honoured by men as if they were angels, and indeed perhaps some of those who have never yet committed mortal sin, will sit in misery among the spawn of hell. From this you can see that no one should be judged by others here in this life for the good or evil that they do. Actions may legitimately be judged as good or evil, but not our fellow-men.

Chapter 30

But, I beg you, by whom shall men's actions be judged? Surely by those who have authority and responsibility for their souls, whether granted publicly by the law and provision of Holy Church, or else privately in the spirit by the special prompting of the Holy Ghost in perfect charity. Let each man beware that he does not presume to undertake to criticize and rebuke the faults of others, unless he truly feels that he is inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost in what he does, for otherwise he may very easily err in his judgements. And so beware: judge yourself as you please, between yourself and God or your spiritual adviser, and let other men be.

Chapter 31

Once you feel that you have done all you can to amend your life according to the practice and judgement of Holy Church, then you must apply yourself eagerly to this work of contemplation. And then, if it happens that particular deeds of yours done previously, or any new thoughts or sinful stirrings, keep on pressing into your consciousness between you and your God, you must vigorously trample on them with a fervent stirring of love, and tread them down beneath your feet. And try to cover them with a thick cloud of forgetting, as if they had never been done by you or anyone else on earth. And if they often rise up, often push them down, and, in a word, push them down as often as they rise. And if the labour seems hard, you may seek tricks and wiles and secret stratagems of spiritual technique to push them away – stratagems that are better learned from God by experience than from any earthly man.

Chapter 32

All the same, I will tell you something of what I know of these stratagems. Try them yourself, and do better if you can.

Do your best to pretend not to know that they are pressing so hard upon you, between you and your God, and try to look over their shoulders, as it were, searching for something else – and that something is God, enclosed in a cloud of unknowing. If you do this, I believe that within a short time your labour will be eased. I believe that, if well and truly understood, this technique is nothing but a longing desire for God, to feel and see him so far as may be here. Such a desire is charity, and it always merits relief.

There is another technique: try it if you please. When you feel that you are quite unable to push them down, cower down before them like a wretched coward overcome in battle, and think that it is foolish for you to strive against them any longer, and therefore, in the hands of your enemies, you surrender yourself to God. Feel as if you were defeated for ever. Pay close attention to this technique, I beg you, for it seems to me that in trying it you should melt entirely to water. And indeed, it seems to me that if this technique is intelligently understood, it is simply a true knowledge and feeling of yourself as you are, a wretch and a lump of dirt, far worse than nothing; and such knowledge and feeling is humility. And this humility deserves to have God himself descending in his might to avenge you on your enemies, and to take you up and tenderly dry the eyes of your spirit, as the father does with the child that is about to perish in the mouths of wild swine or frenzied biting bears.

Chapter 33

I shall not tell you any more techniques at this time because, if you have grace to try out these, I believe that you will be better able to teach me than I you. For, even if what I have taught you is correct, I truly feel very far from being an expert; and so I beg you to help me, and to work on your behalf and on mine.

Press on then, and labour hard for a while, I beg you, and humbly endure the pain if you cannot learn these techniques quickly, for truly this is your purgatory. And when your pain has gone, and the techniques have been granted by God and, by his grace, have become habits, then I have no doubt that you will be cleansed not only of sin but also of the punishment for sin – I mean of the punishment for the particular sins you have committed, not of the punishment for original sin; for that punishment will always remain with you until the day you die, however eagerly you work. All the same, it will hurt you very little, in comparison with the punishment for your individual sins; and yet you will not be without great labour. For out of original sin will always spring new and fresh stirrings of sin, which you must always smite down, eagerly slashing them away with a sharp, double-edged and fearful sword of discernment. From this you may see and learn that there is no lasting security and no true rest in this life.

Yet you must not retreat because of this, nor be too frightened of failing. For if it happens that you have grace to destroy the punishment for the particular deeds you have done, in the way just described, or in a better way if you can, you can be sure that the punishment for original sin or the new stirrings of sin yet to come will be able to hurt you very little.

Chapter 34

If you ask me by what means you are to achieve this work of contemplation, I beseech almighty God of his great grace and his great courtesy to teach you himself. For I would have you know well that I cannot tell you; and that is no surprise, because it is the work of God alone, specially undertaken in whatever soul he chooses, without any desert on the part of that soul. For without God's work, no saint or angel can think of desiring it. And I believe that our Lord will deign to bring about this work in those who have been habitual sinners as particularly and as often – yes, and more particularly and more often – as in others who by comparison with them have never caused him much grief. And he will do this because he wants to be recognized as all-merciful and all-powerful, and because he wants to be seen to act as he pleases, where he pleases, and when he pleases.

Yet he does not grant this grace or bring about this work in any soul that is incapable of it. On the other hand, no soul that lacks this grace is capable of receiving it, no, whether it be the soul of a sinner or of an innocent person. It is neither granted for innocence nor withheld for sin. Note well that I say withheld, and not withdrawn.[59] Beware of error here, I beg you, for the nearer we approach truth, the more careful we need to be of error. I intend well, but if you cannot understand this, lay it aside till God comes and teaches you; do that, and you will come to no harm.

Guard against pride, for it blasphemes against God in what he gives, and emboldens sinners. If you were truly humble, you would feel the truth of what I say about the work of contemplation, that God gives it freely without any desert. The nature of this work is such that its presence gives a soul the capacity to have it and feel it; and no soul can have that capacity without it. The capacity for this

work is inseparable from the work itself, so that whoever experiences the work has the capacity for it, or else he would not experience it – so much so that without this work a soul is as it were dead, and cannot long for it or desire it. You have as much of it as you will and desire, neither more nor less, and yet it is not a will or a desire, but something, you do not know what, that stirs you to will and desire you do not know what. Do not worry, I beg you, if this is all you know, but always press further and further forward, just so long as you keep going.

To put it more exactly, let that thing do with you whatever it pleases and lead you wherever it pleases. Let it do the working, and you be the material it works upon; just watch it, and let it be. Do not interfere with it, as if to help, for fear you should spoil everything. You simply be the wood, and let it be the carpenter; you simply be the house, and let it be the master[60] who lives there. Be blind for the time being, and cut away desire for knowledge, for it will hinder you more than help you. It is sufficient for you to feel yourself pleasingly stirred by a thing, you do not know what, so long as, in being stirred, you have no specific thoughts of anything below God, and your intention is nakedly directed towards God.

And if this is so, then trust firmly that it is God alone, entirely by himself, who stirs your will and your desire, without intermediary[61] either on his part or on yours. And do not be afraid of the Devil, for he may never come so near. He can never get to stir someone's will, except occasionally by distant means, however cunning a devil he may be. For not even a good angel has power enough to stir your will directly, nor, in a word, does any being but God alone.

Thus you can understand to some extent by these words, but much more clearly by experience, that in the work of contemplation no intermediaries are to be used, nor indeed can it be achieved by intermediaries. All intermediate activities depend on it, and it depends on no intermediaries, nor can any intermediary lead to it.

Chapter 35

All the same, intermediate activities do exist in which an apprentice in contemplation ought to be occupied, and they are these: Lection, Meditation and Orison. For your better understanding these may be called Reading, Thinking and Praying. You will find that another book written by someone else[62] discusses these three much better than I can tell you, and so there is no need to tell you about their properties here. But I can tell you this: these three are so linked together that for those who are beginners and those who are making progress, but not for those who have gained such perfection as is possible in this life, thinking may not be fully achieved unless reading or listening comes first. (In a way, reading and listening are the same: scholars read books, and the uneducated 'read' scholars when they listen to them preaching the word of God.) And prayer may hardly be achieved by beginners and those making progress unless thinking comes first. You will see this demonstrated in what follows.

God's word, either written or spoken, can be compared to a mirror. Spiritually, the eye of your soul is your reason; your conscience is your face in spiritual terms. And just as you can see that, if there is a spot of dirt on your bodily face, your bodily eye cannot perceive that spot or know where it is without a mirror or instruction from outside itself, so it is spiritually. Without reading or hearing God's word, it is impossible to human understanding for a soul that is blinded by sinful habits to see a spot of dirt in its conscience. In the same terms, when someone sees in a bodily or spiritual mirror, or learns from the instruction of others, whereabouts the spot of dirt is on his face, whether it is bodily or spiritual, then and no sooner he immediately runs to the well to wash himself. If the spot is some sin

actually committed, then the well is Holy Church and the water is confession in every detail. If it is only a blind root and stirring of sin, then the well is merciful God and the water is prayer and all that accompanies it.

So you can see that no thinking can be fully achieved by beginners and those making progress unless reading or listening comes first, and no prayer can be achieved without thinking.

Chapter 36

But it is not so with those who work continually at the work of contemplation. Their meditations are like sudden apprehensions and blind feelings of their own sinfulness or of the goodness of God, without the mediation of any previous reading or listening, and without any special consideration of anything below God. These sudden apprehensions and blind feelings are sooner learned from God than from human teaching.

It would not matter if at present you had no other meditations of your sinfulness or of the goodness of God (I mean if you feel yourself so moved by grace and by your advisers) than such as you may find in the word SIN and the word GOD, or in other such words as you please – not analysing or interpreting these words with intellectual ingenuity, seeking to grasp their properties as if by doing so you wanted to heighten your devotion. I believe that in the work of contemplation this could never be so. But keep these words completely whole, and focus on sin as a lump, you do not know what, nothing other than yourself. While you are engaged in this blind consideration of sin, thus coagulated into a lump, which is nothing other than yourself, it seems to me that there could be no madder creature, needing to be bound down, than yourself. And yet perhaps anyone who looked at you would think you quite soberly disposed in body, without any change of expression, and, whether you were sitting, or walking, or lying, or leaning, or standing, or kneeling, unchangingly restful.

Chapter 37

Just as the meditations of those who, by God's grace, work continually at contemplation rise up suddenly without any intermediary, so do their prayers. I am thinking of their individual prayers, not the prayers that are ordained by Holy Church. For those who are true labourers in contemplation honour no prayers so greatly as the latter, and for this reason they perform them in the form and order laid down by the holy fathers before us. But their individual prayers always rise instantly to God, without any intermediary or any special premeditation preceding or accompanying them. If they are in words, as they are only rarely, then they are in very few words – yes, the fewer the better. Yes, and if it is just a short word of one syllable, that seems to me better than one of two syllables, and more in accordance with the work of the spirit, since it is the case that a spiritual worker in this work of contemplation should always be at the highest and most supreme spiritual level. You can see that this is true by an illustration taken from our natural instincts. If a man or woman is frightened by some sudden occurrence of fire, or of someone's death, or whatever else it may be, then suddenly in the extremity of his spirit he is driven by haste and necessity to shout or beg for help. So how does he do it? Certainly not in many words, or even in one word of two syllables. And why is that? Because it seems too long a delay to express the urgency and agitation of his spirit. And so he bursts out violently, in great emotion, and shouts just a short word of one syllable, such as the word FIRE! or the word out![63] Just as this short word FIRE! sooner arouses the ears of listeners, and pierces them more rapidly, so does a short word of one syllable when it is not just spoken or thought but secretly intended in the depth of spirit, which is also the height

(for in spiritual things it is all the same, height and depth, length and breadth). And it pierces the ears of almighty God sooner than any long psalm mindlessly mumbled in the mouth. That is why it is written that short prayers pierce heaven.[64]

Chapter 38

And why does it pierce heaven, this short little prayer of one little syllable? Surely because it is prayed with a full heart, in the height and the depth, the length and the breadth of the spirit of the person who prays. It is in the height because it is prayed with all the power of the spirit. It is in the depth because in this little syllable is contained all the wisdom of the spirit. It is in the length because, if it could always feel as it is feeling now, it would always shout as it is shouting now. It is in the breadth because it desires the same for all others as it desires for itself. It is at this moment that a soul has comprehended with all the saints, as we read in St Paul, what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of God,[65] everlasting and all-loving, all-powerful and all-wise – not fully, but in part and in the way appropriate to the work of contemplation. God's everlastingness is his length, his love is his breadth, his power is his height, and his wisdom is his depth. It is no wonder if a soul, which is so nearly conformed by grace to the image and likeness of God, its maker, is soon heard by God. Yes, even though it were a very sinful soul – which is, as it were, an enemy to God – if it could through grace manage to shout such a little syllable in the height and the depth, the length and the breadth of its spirit, the violent noise of this shout would mean that it would always be heard and helped by God.

Take an example. Suppose someone is your deadly enemy, and you hear him so terrified that he shouts out in the height of his spirit the little word FIRE! or the word OUT! Without regard to the fact that he is your enemy, but for sheer pity in your heart, stirred and aroused by the misery of this shout, you get up – yes, even if it were about midwinter's night – and help him to put out his fire, or to calm and

ease him in his distress. Oh Lord, since a human being can by grace be made so merciful as to have so much mercy and so much pity on his enemy, regardless of his enmity, what pity and what mercy will God have of the spiritual shout of a soul, made and shaped in the height and the depth, the length and the breadth of his spirit – God, who has by nature all that human beings have by grace, and far more? Surely he will have far more mercy, beyond comparison, since the fact is that what is possessed by nature is more intimate to its possessor than what is possessed by grace.[66]

Chapter 39

For this reason we should pray in the height and the depth, the length and the breadth of our spirit; and that not in many words, but in a little word of one syllable.

And what word should this be? Surely such a word as best suits the intrinsic nature of prayer. And what word is that? Let us first see what prayer is in its own nature, and then we may know more clearly what word will best suit the nature of prayer.

Prayer in itself, to put it exactly, is nothing but a devout intention directed towards God for the attainment of good things and the removal of evils.

Then, since it is the case that all evils are comprehended in sin, either as their cause or in their being, let us, when we wish to pray earnestly for the removal of evils, say or think or intend nothing else, and no more words, than the little word SIN. And if we wish to pray earnestly for the attainment of good things, let us cry out, in word or thought or desire, nothing else, and no more words, than the word GOD. For in God are all good things, both as their cause and in their being.

Do not be surprised that I set these words apart from all others; for if I knew any shorter words that comprehended in them all good things and all evils as fully as these two words do, or again if I had been taught by God to choose any other words, I would have chosen the others and given up these; and so I advise you to do. Do not deliberate about words, for in that way you will never gain your purpose or achieve contemplation, for it is never attained by deliberation, but only by grace. And so, though I set down these words here, do not choose any words for your own prayers other than those you are stirred by God to choose. On the other hand, if

God stirs you to choose these, I do not advise you to give them up – I mean, if you are going to pray in words, not otherwise – for they are very short words.

Though brevity of prayer is highly recommended here, that does not mean that frequency of prayer is to be avoided. For, as was said earlier, prayer is made in the length of one's spirit, and so it should never cease until the moment when it has fully obtained what it longed for. We have an illustration of this in the terrified man or woman mentioned before; for we see well that they never stop shouting the little word OUT! or the little word FIRE! until they have in large part gained help in their trouble.

Chapter 40

In the same way, fill your spirit with the spiritual import of the word SIN, without specific regard to the type of sin, whether it is venial or mortal, pride, wrath, or envy, covetousness, sloth, gluttony, or lechery. What need is there for contemplatives to care what or how great a sin it is? To them all sins seem equally great – I mean during this work of contemplation – when the smallest sin separates them from God and holds them back from spiritual peace.

And feel sin as a lump, you do not know what, but nothing other than yourself. And then shout continuously in spirit, 'Sin, sin, sin! out, out, out!' This spiritual shout is better learned from God by experience than from any human being by word; for it is best when it is in the spirit alone, without specific thought or any utterance of words, except on some rare occasion when for abundance of spirit it bursts out into words, so that the body as well as the soul is filled with the sorrow and burden of sin.

You must do the same with the little word GOD. Fill your spirit with its spiritual import without any specific regard to any of God's works, whether they are good, better or best of all, in body or in spirit, or to any virtue that may be shaped in the human soul by grace, regardless of whether it is humility or charity, patience or abstinence, hope, faith, or moderation, chastity or voluntary poverty. What need is there for contemplatives to care about this? They find and experience all virtues in God, for in him are all things, both as their cause and in their being. For it seems to them that, if they had God, they would have all that is good, and therefore they covet nothing with particular concern, but only good God. Do the same, as far as you may by grace; and focus wholly on

God, and on God as a whole, so that nothing is at work in your thought and will, but only God.

And so the whole time you are living in this wretched life, you must always be aware in some way of this foul, stinking lump of sin, as it were united and coagulated into the substance of your being, and for this reason you should focus alternately on these two words, SIN and GOD, with this general understanding, that if you had God you would be without sin, and if you could be without sin you would have God.

Chapter 41

If you ask me now what moderation you must exercise in this work of contemplation, I answer you by saying, 'None at all!' In all your other actions you must exercise moderation, as in eating and drinking, in sleeping, in protecting your body against extreme cold or heat, in how long you pray or read, or in conversing with your fellow Christians: in all these you must exercise moderation, so that they are neither too much or too little. But in this work of contemplation you must not keep within limits, for I want you never to cease from this work while you are alive.

I do not say that you will always be able to continue in it with equal freshness, for that cannot be. Sometimes sickness and other unpredictable states of body and soul, with many other natural necessities, will hinder you greatly, and often make you descend from the height of contemplation. But I say that you must always be engaged in it, either in earnest or in game – that is to say, either in reality or in intention. And so, for the love of God, guard against sickness as much as you reasonably can, so that, as far as you may, you are not the cause of your own weakness. For I tell you truly that this work demands the greatest tranquillity, and a state of health and purity in body as much as in soul.

And so, for the love of God, regulate your conduct with moderation in body and in soul, and keep yourself as healthy as possible. And if sickness comes that you cannot control, have patience and humbly await God's mercy, and then all will be well enough. For I tell you truly that patience in sickness and in various other tribulations often pleases God far more than any delightful devotion that you may experience in good health.

Chapter 42

But perhaps you ask me how you are to regulate yourself with moderation in food, in sleep, and in everything else. And to this I am inclined to answer very briefly, 'Take what comes.' Always do the work of contemplation without cease and without moderation, and you will easily know how to begin and end all your other activities with excellent moderation. I cannot believe that a soul that continues in this work night and day without moderation would be able to go wrong in any of these outward activities – and otherwise it seems to me that it would always go wrong.

And so, if I could achieve a vigilant and eager concern for this inward spiritual work in my soul, I would then be heedless about eating and drinking, sleeping and speaking and all my outward activities. For truly I think that by such heedlessness I would more readily arrive at moderation than by any eager concern for these things, as if by that concern to establish a limit and measure for them. Truly, I would never achieve it in this way, whatever I might do or say. Let people say what they will, and let experience bear witness. So lift up your heart with a blind stirring of love, and focus now on sin and now on God. You want to have God, and you want to lack sin. God wants you, and sin you can be sure of. Now may good God help you, for now you have need!

Chapter 43

See that nothing is at work in your mind or your will but God alone, and try to overthrow all knowledge and feeling of anything below God, and trample it all down deep beneath the cloud of forgetting. And you must understand that in this work of contemplation you are not only to forget all other created beings than yourself, and their actions or yours, but you are also to forget both yourself and your actions for God's sake, as well as all other beings and their actions. For it is the nature of a perfect lover not only to love more than himself the thing he loves but also in a sense to hate himself for the sake of the thing he loves.

This is how you must conduct yourself: you must loathe and find wearisome everything that is at work in your mind and your will except God alone. For certainly otherwise, whatever it may be, it is between you and your God. And no wonder if you loathe and detest thinking about yourself, when you must always feel sin as a foul, stinking lump, you do not know what, between you and your God – a lump which is nothing but yourself. For it must seem to you united and coagulated with the substance of your being, yes, as if there were no distinction between them.

So break down all knowledge and feeling of every kind of created being, but most forcibly of yourself. For knowledge and feeling of all other created beings depends on knowledge and feeling of yourself, since, in comparison with yourself, all other created beings are easily forgotten. If you are eager to set about testing this, you will find, when you have forgotten all other created beings and all that they do, yes, and also all that you yourself do, that there will still remain, between you and your God, a naked knowledge and feeling of your own existence; and that knowledge and feeling always need

to be destroyed, before it comes about that you can truly experience perfect contemplation.

Chapter 44

Now you ask me, though, how you can destroy this naked knowledge and feeling of your own existence. For perhaps it seems that if it were destroyed all other hindrances would be destroyed; and if you think this, you are certainly right. But in answer to your question, I say that without special grace freely given by God, together with a corresponding capacity on your part to receive that grace, this naked knowledge and feeling of your own existence may in no way be destroyed. This capacity is nothing but a deep and powerful spiritual sorrow. But in this sorrow you need to exercise moderation in this way: you must be careful at the time of this sorrow not to strain your body or your spirit too harshly, but to sit quite still, as if slipping asleep,[67] worn out with sobbing and sunk into sorrow. This is true sorrow, this is perfect sorrow, and blessed is he who achieves such sorrow. All human beings have reason for sorrow, but someone who knows and feels *that he is* feels most special reason for sorrow. Compared with this, all other sorrows are like game beside earnest. For someone who knows and feels not only what he is but that he is[68] can be sorry in earnest; and someone who has never felt this sorrow has reason for sorrow, because he has never yet felt perfect sorrow.

This sorrow, when experienced, cleanses the soul not only of sin but also of the pain that is its desert for sin; moreover, it makes a soul able to receive the joy that takes away all knowledge and feeling of one's own existence. This sorrow, if truly understood, is full of holy desire; otherwise no one living on earth could endure it or bear it. For if a soul were not somewhat sustained by a kind of delight in its true practice of contemplation, it would not be able to bear the pain it has in knowing and feeling that it exists. The soul

desires to have true knowledge and feeling of God in purity of spirit (so far as that may be on earth), but then feels that it cannot, for it always finds its knowledge and feeling as it were possessed and filled by a foul, stinking lump of itself, which must always be hated and despised and forsaken if the soul is to be God's perfect disciple, taught by God himself on the mount of perfection;[69] and every time it feels this, it almost goes mad for sorrow, weeping and wailing, struggling, cursing and swearing, and, to put it briefly, feels that it bears such a heavy burden of itself that it does not care what becomes of it, so long as God is pleased. Yet in all this sorrow the soul does not desire not to exist, for that would be diabolical madness and contempt for God; but it is well pleased to exist, and offers heartfelt thanks to God for the excellent gift of existence, even though it desires unceasingly to lack knowledge and feeling of its existence.[70]

Every soul needs to experience and feel within itself this sorrow and this desire, whether in this way or another, as God deigns to teach his spiritual disciples, in accordance with his good pleasure and their corresponding capacity in body and in soul, in level of attainment and in temperament, until the time comes when they can be perfectly united to God in perfect charity – such perfection as can be attained on earth if God grants.

Chapter 45[71]

I will tell you one thing, though: a young disciple who is not yet well practised and tested in spiritual activity can easily be deceived in this work of contemplation, and, unless he soon takes care and has grace to hold back and humbly accept guidance, his bodily powers may perhaps be destroyed and his spiritual senses give way to delusions. All this is the result of pride, sensuality and intellectual ingenuity.

The deception may happen in this way. A young man or woman, newly applied to learning devotion, hears this sorrow and desire read and spoken about – how one is to lift one's heart up to God and unceasingly desire to feel God's love. And applying their minds ingeniously, such people at once understand these words not spiritually, as they are intended, but carnally and physically, and they violently torment their physical hearts in their breasts. And what with lacking the grace to which they lay claim, and what with their own pride and ingenuity, they strain their veins and their bodily powers in such a bestial and violent way that within a short time one of two things happens. They may succumb to weariness and a kind of listless weakness of body and soul, which makes them turn outside themselves to seek some false and empty carnal and physical enjoyment, as if to refresh body and spirit. Alternatively, if they do not succumb in this way, then – on account of their spiritual blindness and the bodily inflaming of their constitution during this feigned contemplative work (which is not spiritual, but bestial) – either they deservedly have their breasts inflamed with an unnatural physical heat, caused by misusing their bodies or by this feigned contemplation, or they experience an imaginary heat produced by

the Devil, their spiritual enemy, caused by their pride, sensuality and intellectual ingenuity.

And yet perhaps they believe it to be the fire of love,[72] produced and kindled by the grace and goodness of the Holy Ghost. Truly, many evils spring from this deception and its offshoots: great hypocrisy, great heresy, and great error. For in the Devil's school such false feeling is immediately followed by false knowledge, just as in God's school true feeling is followed by true knowledge. For I tell you truly that the Devil has his contemplatives, just as God has his.

This deception of false feeling, and of false knowledge succeeding it, has many remarkable variations, according to the variety of situations and the precise attributes of those that are deceived; so has the true feeling and knowledge of those that are saved. But I will set out no more deceptions here than those with which I believe you will be assailed if you ever commit yourself to this work of contemplation. For what would it profit you to know how great scholars, and men and women in other circumstances than yourself, are deceived? Not at all, surely. And so I will tell you only of those that will befall you if you exert yourself in this work; and I do this so that you will be wary of them in your activity if you are assailed by them.

Chapter 46

For God's love, therefore, take care in this work of contemplation not to strain your heart in your breast too roughly or immoderately, but work with skill rather than with brute force.[73] For the more skilfully, the more humbly and spiritually; and the more roughly, the more physically and like a beast. So take care, for any beast-like heart[74] that presumes to touch the peak of contemplation will certainly be beaten away with stones. Stones are hard and dry in nature, and where they hit they hurt very painfully; and certainly such rough strainings are hard fixed in the fleshliness of bodily feelings, and are dry and barren of knowledge of grace;[75] and they hurt the wretched soul painfully, and make it fester in delusions devised by devils. Be wary, then, of this beast-like roughness, and teach yourself to love skilfully, with a gentle and composed countenance in body and in soul. Courteously and humbly await the will of our Lord, and do not reach out over-hastily like a greedy greyhound, however keen your hunger. And, to put it playfully, I urge you to do your best to control the rough and immature stirrings of your spirit, just as if you did not at all want to let God know how glad you would be to see him and have him or feel him. Perhaps you think this is spoken childishly and in sport; but I believe that anyone who had grace to do and feel as I say would feel God playing merrily with him, like a father with his child,[76] kissing and hugging, and would rejoice that it was so.

Chapter 47

Do not be surprised that I am speaking in this childlike way, and as it were foolishly and without natural discretion. I am doing so for certain reasons, as I believe that on many occasions I have been stirred to feel like this and to think and speak like this to some of my other intimate friends in God, just as I am now doing to you.

One reason why I urge you to hide from God the desire of your heart is this: because I expect that by such concealment it would come to his knowledge, to your benefit and the fulfilment of your desire, more clearly than it would by any other kind of expression that I think you could yet achieve. Another reason is that I would like such concealed expression to lead you away from the roughness of bodily feeling into the purity and depth of spiritual feeling, and thus in due course help you at last to tie the spiritual knot of burning love between you and your God, in spiritual union and harmony of will.

You know well that God is a spirit; and if someone is to be united with him it needs to be in truth and depth of spirit, very far from anything feigned and bodily. It is true that everything is known to God, and nothing, either bodily or spiritual, can be hidden from his knowledge. But because it is the case that he is a spirit, something hidden in the depth of spirit is more openly made known and revealed to him than anything mingled with any kind of bodiliness; for in the nature of things, everything bodily is further from God than anything spiritual. For this reason it appears that as long as our desire is mingled with any kind of bodiliness – as it is when we force and strain ourselves in spirit and body at once – it is further from God than it would be if we acted with more devotion and skill, in sobriety and purity and in depth of spirit.

Here you can see, at least to some extent, why I urge you to conceal and hide the stirring of your desire from God in such a childlike way. And yet I am not urging you to hide it completely, for it would be a fool's advice to urge you to do completely what cannot be done at all. But I am urging you to do what you can to hide it. And why do I urge this? Certainly because I want you to cast it into the depth of your spirit, far from any crude mingling with anything bodily (which would make it less spiritual, and by that token further from God); and because I know well that the more your soul has of spirituality, the less it has of bodiliness, and the nearer it is to God, the better it pleases him, and the more clearly it may be seen by him. Not that his sight can be clearer at any time or in any respect than another, because it is eternally unchanging; but your soul is more like him when it is pure in spirit, because he is a spirit.

There is another reason why I urge you to do what you can not to let him know. You and I, and many such as ourselves, are so liable to understand in a bodily sense something which is said spiritually that perhaps, if I had urged you to show the stirring of your heart to God, you would have shown it to him in a bodily way, in expression, or in voice, or in word, or by some other crude bodily exertion, as when you are to show something hidden in your heart to a bodily person; and to that extent your work would have been impure. For things must be shown in one way to human beings, and in another way to God.

Chapter 48

I do not say this because I want you to stop if at any time you are moved to pray orally, or, through abundance of devotion in your spirit, to burst out in speech to God as if to a human being, and utter some good phrase to which you feel stirred, such as ‘Good Jesus!’, ‘Fair Jesus!’, ‘Sweet Jesus!’, or anything similar. No, God forbid that you should so understand me, for truly that is not what I mean. And God forbid that I should separate what God has joined, the body and the spirit, for God wishes to be served with body and with soul, both together, as is proper, and to grant man his heavenly reward both in body and in soul.

And, as a foretaste of that reward, sometimes – not once or twice, but perhaps very often, whenever pleases him – he will set aflame the body of a devout servant of his, here in this life, with most wonderful sensations of sweetness and pleasure. Some of these do not come into the body from outside through the windows of our senses, but from inside, rising and springing from abundance of spiritual joy, and from true devotion in spirit. Such pleasure and sweetness should not be held suspect, and, in a word, I believe that anyone who experiences it cannot hold it suspect. But all other pleasures, sounds, and exultings, and sweetnesses, that come suddenly from outside yourself, you do not know from where, I beg you to hold suspect. For they may be either good or evil: produced by a good angel if they are good, and by an evil angel if they are evil. But such experience certainly cannot be evil if the deceptions of intellectual ingenuity and of uncontrolled straining of the bodily heart are removed as I am teaching you, or in a better way if you know one. And why is that? Truly, because what produces this pleasure is the devout stirring of love, that dwells in pure spirit. This is shaped by the hand of almighty God, without intermediary, and

so it must always be remote from any delusion or false opinion that may come to us in earthly life.

As to the other pleasures, sounds and sweetnesses, and how you should know whether they are good or evil, I do not intend to tell you now, because it seems to me to be unnecessary; for you can find this in another place, written by someone else,[77] a thousand times better than I can say or write. Indeed, you can find there a far better explanation of what I have written here. But what does it matter? I shall not cease because of that, and it will not trouble me to satisfy the desire and stirring of your heart, which you have shown yourself to possess, before this in your words, and now in your deeds.

This I can say to you, though, about those sounds and sweetnesses that enter by the windows of your senses, and may be either good or evil. Practise continually this blind, devout and glad stirring of love that I am describing, and then I have no doubt that it will be well able to tell you about them. And if on the first occasion you are partly bewildered by them, because they are unfamiliar, still, this is what it will do for you: it will bind your heart so firmly that you will not give full credence to them until the time comes when you gain certainty about them, either wonderfully from within by the spirit of God, or else from without by the advice of some judicious spiritual father.

Chapter 49

I beg you, then, to rely gladly on this humble stirring of love in your heart, and follow it, for it will be your guide in this life and bring you to heaven in the other. It is the substance of every good life and without it no good work can be begun or finished. It is nothing but a good will in harmony with God, and a kind of satisfaction and gladness that you feel in your will with all that he does.

Such a good will is the substance of all perfection. All feelings of sweetness and pleasure, bodily or spiritual, are, as it were, merely its accidents,[78] however holy they may be; they merely depend on this good will. I call them accidents, because they may be present or absent without affecting its nature. (I mean in this life; but it is not so in the bliss of heaven, for there they will be indivisibly united with the substance of perfection, as the body in which they operate will be united with the soul.) So their substance here is simply a good spiritual will. And I firmly believe that anyone who experiences this perfection of will (so far as it may be attained on earth) will be as willing and pleased to lack any sweet or pleasant sensation that can come to a person in this life, if that is what God wills, as he would be to feel it and possess it.

Chapter 50

Thus you can see that we should direct our whole concern towards this humble stirring of love in our will; and (if it is courteous and becoming to say so) we should have a kind of heedlessness about all other feelings of sweetness and pleasure, bodily or spiritual, however delightful or however holy they may be. If they come, welcome them; but do not rely too much on them for fear of weakness, for it will take a great deal of your strength to sustain such feelings and weepings[79] for any length of time. Perhaps, too, you may be moved to love God for their sake, something you will recognize by the fact that you are excessively discontent when they are missing. If so, your love is not yet either pure or perfect, for though a pure and perfect love permits the body to be gratified and gladdened by the presence of such sweet feelings and weepings, it is nevertheless not discontented but very well pleased to lack them, if that is God's will.

Yet in some people it is uncommon for their love to be without such pleasures, while in others such sensations of sweetness and pleasure are present only rarely. All this is as God disposes and ordains, according to different people's welfare and needs. Some people are so weak and tender of spirit that, if they did not receive some encouragement by experiencing such sweetness, they could never bear or endure the variety of temptations and tribulations that they suffer and are tormented with in this life at the hands of their bodily and spiritual enemies. Some too are so weak in body that they cannot perform severe penance to purify themselves, and our Lord will most graciously cleanse them in spirit with such sweet feelings and weepings. And then on the other hand there are people so strong in spirit that they are able to find sufficient pleasure

inwardly in their souls, in offering up this reverent and humble stirring of love and harmony of will, so that they have no great need to be sustained with such sweet pleasure in their bodily feelings. Which of the two of these types is the holier or dearer to God, God knows and not I.

Chapter 51

Rely humbly, therefore, on this blind stirring of love in your heart; I do not mean your bodily heart, but your spiritual heart, which is your will. And be very careful that you do not understand in a bodily sense what is said spiritually, for I tell you truly that the bodily and literal conceptions of those who have ingenious and fanciful minds are the cause of much error. You can see an illustration of this in my urging you to conceal your desire from God as far as possible. Perhaps, if I had urged you to show your desire to God, you would have understood it in a more bodily way than you do now, when I am urging you to conceal it; for you know well that everything that is deliberately concealed is cast into the depth of the spirit.

Thus it seems to me to be highly necessary to have great care in understanding words that are spoken with a spiritual purpose, so that you understand them not in a bodily sense, but spiritually, as they are intended. It is especially desirable to be careful with the words IN and UP, because I believe that among those who intend to be contemplatives great error and deception derive from the misunderstanding of these two words. I know something of this by experience, and something by report; and I want to tell you a little about these deceptions as they appear to me.

A young disciple in God's school, newly turned away from the world, may believe that the short period in which he has given himself to penance and prayer, on the advice received from his confessor, enables him to undertake the work of contemplation of which he has heard those about him speak or read, or perhaps has read himself. And so, when he reads of spiritual activity, or hears it discussed, and especially statements such as that one should draw

one's thoughts entirely within oneself or that one must climb above oneself, then at once, through spiritual blindness and the literalism and ingenuity of his natural intelligence, he misunderstands these statements, and believes that, because he finds in himself a natural longing for mystical matters, he is therefore called by grace to contemplation. This may go so far that, if his adviser will not agree that he should engage in this activity, he feels a kind of resentment against him, and thinks – yes, and perhaps says to others like himself – that he can find no one who really knows what he means. And so at once, out of the boldness and presumption of their ingenious minds, such people give up humble prayer and penance too soon, and apply themselves (so they believe) to highly spiritual inward work in their souls – work which, if truly understood, is neither bodily activity nor spiritual activity, but, to put it bluntly, it is unnatural work, and the Devil is its leader. It is the nearest way to death of body and soul, for it is madness, not wisdom, and it leads to madness itself. Yet that is not what they believe, for in this work they imagine themselves to think of nothing but God.

Chapter 52

The madness I am referring to is produced in this way. They read and hear it said that they should give up outward activity with their senses, and work inwardly; and because they do not know what inward working is they work wrongly. They turn their bodily senses inwards into their own bodies against the course of nature, and contort themselves as if to see inwards with their bodily eyes, and hear inwards with their ears, and similarly with all their senses, smelling, tasting and feeling inwards. And thus they turn themselves inside out, against the course of nature, and with their ingenuity torment their imaginations so excessively that at last their brains are turned in their heads. Then immediately the Devil has power to feign certain false lights or sounds, sweet smells in their noses, wonderful tastes in their mouths, and many strange heats and burnings in their bodily breasts or bowels, in their backs and loins, and in their private parts.

Yet in this fantasy it seems to them that they are tranquilly thinking of God without any hindrance from distracting thoughts. And indeed that is true in a way, for they are so filled with falsehood that distraction cannot harm them. And why? Because the very same devil who would minister distracting thoughts to them if they were on the right path is the leader of this exercise – and you can be sure he does not wish to hinder himself! He will not interfere with their thoughts of God for fear he should arouse suspicion.

Chapter 53

Many remarkable habits attend those who are deceived by this false contemplation, or any aspect of it, by contrast with the habits of those who are God's true disciples. The latter are always becoming in all their behaviour, bodily or spiritual, but it is not so with the former. Were anyone to watch or catch sight of them as they sit while thus engaged, if it happened that their eyelids were open, he would see them staring as if they were mad, and grinning as if they saw the Devil. They had better look out, to be sure, for the Devil is really not far off! Some have their eyes fixed in their heads as if they were staggering[80] sheep knocked on the head and soon about to die. Some hang their heads to the side, as if a worm were in their ears. Some pipe feebly when they have to speak, as if there were no energy in their bodies; and this is the true characteristic of a hypocrite. Some are so greedy and hasty to say what they think, that they cry and whine in their throats; and this characterizes heretics,[81] and those who, with presumption and intellectual ingenuity, insist on upholding error.

Many disorderly and unbecoming habits attend this error, if you were to recognize them all. There are some upholders of error, though, who are skilful enough to be able to control themselves in large part when they are in public; but if they could be seen in places where they are at home, I think their behaviour would not be concealed. Indeed, I think that if someone were to contradict their opinions directly, they would soon be seen to lose some of their control; and yet it seems to them that everything they do is for the love of God and to uphold the truth. Truly, unless God in his mercy brings about a miracle to make them soon stop, I expect they will love God in this way for so long that they will go stark staring mad

to the Devil! I do not assert that the Devil has any servant on earth so perfect as to be deceived and infected with all the fantasies that I describe here, though indeed it could be that one of them *is* infected with them all, or even that many are. But I do say that he has no perfect hypocrite or heretic on earth who is not guilty of some of the fantasies I have mentioned, or perhaps shall mention, if God grants.

Some people are so burdened with strange and foolish habits in their bodily conduct that when they hear something they twist their heads peculiarly to one side, and up go their chins. They let their mouths gape open, as if they could hear with them and not with their ears. Some, when about to speak, point with their fingers or at their fingers, or at their own chests, or the chests of those they are addressing. Some can neither sit still, stand still, nor lie still, without either waggling their feet or else doing something with their hands. Some row with their arms as they are speaking, as if they needed to swim over a great stretch of water. Some are always smiling and laughing at every word they speak, as if they were flirtatious girls or silly juggling jesters in search of attention. Appropriate behaviour would mean sober and reserved bodily conduct and a pleasant manner.

I do not say that all these inappropriate habits are in themselves major sins, nor that all those who indulge in them are themselves great sinners. But I say that if these inappropriate and disorderly habits take such control over the person who engages in them that he cannot give them up when he wishes, then they are signs of pride and intellectual ingenuity, and of unruly display and greed for knowledge. In particular they are reliable signs of instability of heart and restlessness of mind, and especially of the lack of true contemplation. That is the only reason why I set out so many of these deceptions here in writing, so that a contemplative can test his own work against them.

Chapter 54

The work of contemplation will have a favourable effect on the body as well as the soul of anyone who practises it, and make him agreeable to everyone, man or woman, who sees him; so that the appearance of the most ill-favoured man or woman living on earth, if they could by grace be enabled to engage in this work, would be suddenly transformed into graciousness. Thus all good people who saw them would be glad and joyful to have their company, and would find that in their presence they were very greatly comforted in spirit and helped by grace towards God.

So let this gift be gained by anyone permitted by grace to gain it, for anyone who truly possesses it will be well able to govern himself and all that belongs to him by virtue of it. When necessary he would be well able to judge people of all kinds and characters. He would be well able to adapt himself to all who conversed with him, whether or not they were habitual sinners, yet without sin on his own part, to the amazement of all who saw him, drawing others by the help of grace to the same spiritual work that he himself practises.

His words and behaviour would be full of spiritual wisdom, ardent and fruitful, spoken seriously and sincerely, without affectation, very different from the deception and piping of hypocrites. There are some who, when they speak, plan with all their inward and outward powers how they can make every provision to keep up their reputations, speaking humbly and feebly, with many outward signs of devotion, more concerned to seem holy to human eyes than to be holy in the sight of God and his angels. These people will care more and lament more for an ill-regulated look, or a disagreeable or unsuitable word spoken in public, than they will for a thousand

empty thoughts and stinking stirrings of sin willingly indulged in or heedlessly spewed up in the sight of God and the saints and angels in heaven. Ah, Lord God, what pride is there inwardly, when such humble, piping words are so plentiful outwardly? I willingly admit that it is suitable and becoming for those who are inwardly humble to show humble and becoming words and behaviour outwardly, in keeping with the humility that dwells within the heart. But I do not say that the words should be uttered in broken or feeble voices, contrary to the plain natural character of the speakers. If words are true, they will be spoken in veracity and in the integrity of the speaker's voice and spirit; and if someone who has by nature a plain, open, rough voice speaks weakly and feebly – I mean, unless he is sick in body, or is speaking secretly with God or his confessor – that is a clear sign of hypocrisy, whether in the young or the old.

What more shall I say about these poisonous deceptions? Unless these people have grace to give up such piping hypocrisy, I truly believe that, between the inward pride of their hearts and the outward humility of their words, their wretched souls will very soon sink into misery.

Chapter 55

The Devil chooses to deceive some people in the following way. He will marvellously inflame their brains with the desire to uphold God's law and destroy sin in everyone else. He will never tempt them with anything that is manifestly evil. He makes them like anxious prelates watching over the lives of Christian people of all ranks, as an abbot does over his monks. They will rebuke everyone for their faults, just as if they had their souls in their care; and it seems to them that they dare not do otherwise for God's sake. They tell them of the faults they see, claiming to be impelled to do so by the fire of charity and the love of God in their hearts; but in truth they are lying, for it is by the fire of hell surging in their brains and their imaginations.

That this is true is shown by what follows. The Devil is a spirit, and of his own nature he no more has a body than an angel has; but all the same, when he or an angel has God's leave to take on a body so as to minister to anyone in this life, the nature of his body is to some degree in the likeness of the activity to which he will minister. We have illustrations of this in Holy Writ. In the Old Testament and also the New, whenever an angel was sent down in bodily form, the spiritual nature of his business or message was always manifested either by his name or by some attribute or characteristic of his body. It happens in the same way with the Devil, for when he appears in bodily form he reveals in some characteristic of his body what his servants are in spirit.

This can be illustrated by a single instance to stand for all others. I have understood from some students of necromancy who possess the knowledge to summon up wicked spirits, and from some to whom the Devil has appeared in bodily likeness, that in whatever bodily

likeness the Devil appears, he always has only one nostril, and that a large, wide one. And he will gladly raise it, so that a person can see through it up into his brain in his head. This brain is nothing other than the fire of hell, for that is the only brain the Devil can have; and if he is able to make someone look in at it, he desires nothing better, because that glance would make him lose his wits for ever. But an accomplished apprentice of necromancy knows this well enough, and can take precautions, so that he will not harm him.

This is why I say, as I have previously mentioned, that whenever the Devil takes on a body, he reveals in some characteristic of his body what his servants are in spirit. For he so inflames the imagination of his contemplatives with the fire of hell that suddenly, with no discrimination, they shoot out their strange fancies, and they will take upon them without consideration to blame other people's faults prematurely. This is because, spiritually, they have only one nostril. The division that exists in one's nose bodily, separating one nostril from the other, symbolizes that one should have spiritual discrimination, and be able to distinguish good from bad, bad from worse, and good from better, before one gives a final judgement of anything that one has heard spoken or seen done around one. And in a spiritual sense by the brain is understood imagination, because by nature it dwells and operates in the head.

Chapter 56

There are some people who, though not deceived by the error I have been describing, still, as a result of pride, ingenuity of natural intelligence, and scholarly skill, abandon the accepted teaching and advice of Holy Church; and these, with all their supporters, rely too much on their own knowledge. They have never had a firm basis in humble, blind feeling and virtuous living, and therefore they have a well-deserved false feeling, devised and produced by the spiritual enemy; and the outcome is that eventually they burst out in blasphemy against all the saints, sacraments, statutes and ordinances of Holy Church. People dedicated to the world and the flesh, who think the statutes of Holy Church too hard to live up to, incline very quickly and readily towards these heretics and strongly support them, entirely because they appear to lead them by an easier path than that ordained by Holy Church.[82]

Now I truly believe that anyone who declines to take the narrow path to heaven will take the easy path to hell: let everyone test it for himself! For I believe that if all such heretics and all their supporters could be seen clearly as they will be on the last day, they would at once be seen to be secretly burdened with great and hideous sins of the world and their foul flesh, quite apart from their open presumption in upholding error. Thus they are quite properly called Antichrist's disciples, for of them it is said that, for all their false outward conduct, they will be revealed as proud lechers inwardly.

Chapter 57

No more about them for the moment; but let us proceed to see how these presumptuous young mystical disciples misunderstand another word, UP. If it happens that they read, or hear it read or said, that people should lift up their hearts to God, they immediately stare at the stars as if they wanted to be above the moon, and listen to see if they can hear angels singing from heaven. At times these men will penetrate the planetary spheres with the ingenuity of their imaginations, and make a hole in the firmament so as to look in through it. These men will fashion a God as they please, and clothe him in rich clothes, and place him on a throne, far more elaborately than he has ever been painted on earth. These men will create angels in bodily likeness, and provide each of them with different kinds of musical instrument, far more elaborate than was ever seen or heard in this life.

The Devil will marvellously deceive some of these men. He will send a kind of dew – they suppose it to be angels' food – as if it were coming out of the air, and falling softly and sweetly into their mouths; and so they make it a habit to sit gaping as if to catch flies. Now truly all this is mere deception, however holy it seems, for meanwhile their souls are completely empty of any real devotion. There is so much vanity and falsehood in their hearts, arising from their ingenious practices, that the Devil often fashions strange sounds in their ears, strange lights and shining in their eyes, and wonderful smells in their noses; and it is all counterfeit.

Yet they do not think so; for it seems to them that they have models for this looking and straining upward in St Martin, who in a revelation saw God dressed in his mantle among his angels, and in St Stephen, who saw our Lord standing in heaven, and in many

others; and in Christ, who ascended bodily into heaven in the sight of his disciples.[83] And so they say we should turn our eyes upwards. I fully agree that in our bodily observances we should raise our eyes and our hands if we are stirred in spirit to do so. But I say that the activity of our spirit must not be directed either upwards or downwards, or on one side or another, or forwards or backwards, as with something bodily, because our contemplative work should be spiritual, not bodily or performed in a bodily manner.

Chapter 58

What they say about St Martin and St Stephen, even if they saw such things with their bodily eyes, occurred as a miracle and an attestation of something spiritual. For they know very well that St Martin's mantle never came materially on to Christ's own body because of any need he had of it to protect himself from the cold, but as a miracle and a parable for all of us who are able to be saved and are made one with Christ's body in spirit. Anyone who for the love of God clothes a poor person or does any other good deed, bodily or spiritual, for anyone in need, can be certain that spiritually they do it to Christ, and will receive as real a reward for it as if they had done it to Christ's own body. He says this himself in the Gospel,[84] but he thought it was not enough unless he affirmed it afterwards by miracle; and that was why he showed himself to St Martin in a revelation.

All the revelations ever seen by anyone in this life in bodily form have spiritual meanings; and I believe that if those to whom they were shown, or we for whose sake they were shown, had been spiritual enough, or could have understood their meanings spiritually, they would never have been shown in bodily form. So let us pick off the rough husk, and feed ourselves on the sweet kernel.[85]

But how? Not like the heretics,[86] who are aptly compared to wild men whose custom it is, whenever they have drunk from a fine cup, to throw it against the wall and break it. We must not do this if we want to do well. For we are not to feed ourselves on the fruit in such a way that we despise the tree, or to drink in such a way that we break the cup when we have drunk. By the tree and the cup I mean the visible miracle, and all suitable bodily practices that are in accordance with the work of the spirit and do not hinder it. By the

fruit and the drink I mean the spiritual significance of visible miracles, and of suitable bodily practices such as lifting up our eyes and hands to heaven. If they are done at the prompting of the spirit, they are well done; otherwise they are hypocrisy, and then they are false. If they are true and contain spiritual fruit, why should they be despised? – for people will kiss the cup because there is wine in it.

And what though our Lord, when he ascended bodily into heaven, rose upwards into the clouds as his mother and his disciples watched with their bodily eyes? Does that mean that when contemplating we should always stare upwards with our bodily eyes, to look whether we can see him sitting or standing bodily in heaven, as St Stephen did? No, surely he did not show himself bodily in heaven to St Stephen in order to set us a pattern for looking bodily up into heaven when contemplating, in the hope of seeing him as St Stephen did, whether standing, sitting, or lying. How his body is in heaven, standing, sitting, or lying, no man knows, and there is no need for it to be known, or to know anything more than that his body was raised up with his soul, without separation. The body and the soul, which are his Manhood, are united with the Godhead, also without separation. There is no need to know about his sitting, standing, or lying, but only that he is where he pleases to be and has the bodily form that is most suitable for him. If he showed himself lying or standing or sitting to any person in this life, it was for some spiritual significance, and not because of any bodily posture that he has in heaven.

Let me give an illustration. By ‘standing’ is understood readiness to help; and for this reason one comrade commonly says to another when in bodily battle, ‘Keep going, friend, and fight hard, and don’t give up the battle too easily, because I’ll stand by you.’ He does not just mean standing in a bodily sense, for perhaps the battle is on horse and not on foot, and perhaps it is moving and not standing still; but when he says that he will stand by him he means that he will be ready to help him.

It was for this reason that our Lord showed himself in bodily form in heaven to St Stephen, when he was about to be martyred, and not

to set us a pattern for looking up to heaven. It was as if he had said to St Stephen, as representative of all who suffer persecution for love of him, ‘See, Stephen, as truly as I open this bodily firmament, which is called heaven, and let you see me standing in body, trust steadfastly that I am standing just as truly beside you in spirit, by the power of my Godhead, and I am ready to help you. So stand firmly in the faith, and boldly endure the blows of those sharp stones, for I will crown you in bliss for your reward – and not only you, but all who suffer persecution for my sake in any way.’

Thus you can see that bodily revelations were given for spiritual purposes.

Chapter 59

Concerning the ascension of our Lord, if you say that it occurred in bodily form, and with a bodily as well as a spiritual meaning, because he ascended both as true God and as true Man, I will answer that he had been dead, and was clothed in immortality, and so shall we be at the Day of Judgement. And then we shall be made so subtle in body and in soul together that we shall be wherever we wish in body as swiftly as we are now spiritually in our thoughts, whether it is up or down, on one side or the other, behind or in front. I expect that then all directions will be equally good, as scholars say. Now, though, you cannot come to heaven in body, but only in spirit, and it must be so much in spirit that it will not be in any bodily manner, neither upwards nor downwards, on one side nor the other, behind nor in front.

Know well that those who apply themselves to the work of contemplation, and especially to the contemplative work described in this book, even if they read ‘lift up’ or ‘go in’, and even though the work may be described here as ‘stirring’, need to take very careful note that this ‘stirring’ does not involve reaching in a bodily sense either up or in, and is not any such stirring as from one place to another. And though it may sometimes be called ‘rest’, all the same they must not think that it is rest of the kind that involves staying in a place without moving from it. For the perfection of this contemplative work is so pure and spiritual in nature that, if well and truly understood, it must be regarded as far removed from any stirring and from any place.

It might with good reason be called a sudden transformation rather than a stirring that involves place; for time, place, and body, these three should be forgotten in all spiritual work. And so take care

when engaged in contemplative activity not to use the bodily ascension of Christ as a model for straining your imagination upwards in a bodily sense when praying, as if you wished to climb above the moon; for that is not at all how it should be spiritually. If indeed you were going to ascend bodily into heaven, as Christ did, then you could use it as a model; but no one can do that except God, as he himself witnesses when he says, 'No man may ascend into heaven, but he that descended from heaven, and became man for the love of man.'[87] And if it were possible, as it in no way is, it would be through abundance of spiritual work, and by the power of the spirit alone, very far from any bodily effort or bodily straining of our imagination, whether up, or in, or on one side or the other. And so give up such error; that is not how it must be.

Chapter 60

Now perhaps you will say, ‘How must it be then?’; for it seems to you that you have true evidence that heaven is upwards, given that Christ ascended there upwards in body, and sent the Holy Ghost, as he promised, descending from above in a bodily sense, in the sight of all his disciples; and this is what we believe. So, since you have this true evidence, there seems to you no reason why you should not direct your mind upwards in a bodily sense when you are praying.

My response, weak though it may be, is this. Since it was the case that Christ was to ascend in body and afterwards send the Holy Ghost in body, it was more appropriate that it was upwards and from above than downwards and from below, behind or in front, on one side or the other; but if it were not for this appropriateness, he no more needed to have gone upwards than downwards, I mean so far as the shortness of the way was concerned. For spiritually heaven is as near down as up, and up as down, behind as in front, in front as behind, on one side as on the other, to such an extent that anyone who had a true desire to be in heaven would be there in spirit at that very moment. For the main road and shortest road to heaven is run by desires and not by footsteps. For this reason St Paul says of himself and many others, though our bodies are at present here on earth, ‘yet none the less our life is in heaven’.[88] By their life he meant their love and desire, which in spiritual terms are their life. And indeed a soul is as truly in the place where it loves as it is in the body that lives by it and to which it gives life; so if we want to go to heaven in spirit, there is no need to strain our spirit either up or down, or on one side or the other.

Chapter 61

It is necessary, all the same, to raise our bodily eyes and hands, as if towards the material heaven up there in which the heavenly spheres are fixed. I mean, if we are moved to do so by the working of our spirit, not otherwise – for all bodily things are subject to spiritual things, and are ruled by them, and not the reverse.

The ascension of our Lord provides an illustration. When the appointed time had come at which it pleased him to return corporeally in his Manhood to his Father (from whom he never was and never may be absent in his Godhead), then, through the power of God the Spirit, the Manhood in bodily form followed as one Person. And it was most suitable and appropriate that this should be seen as a movement upward.

The subjection of the body to the spirit can be truly understood, in one way, through experience of the spiritual activity described in this book, by those who undertake such activity. For when a soul earnestly applies itself to this activity, all at once, unnoticed by the contemplative himself, the body, which before he began was perhaps inclining somewhat downwards to one side or the other for the sake of physical comfort, will straighten itself through the power of the spirit, following in bodily likeness the activity of the spirit on a spiritual level. And it is entirely suitable that this should be so.

It is on account of this suitability that human beings, the handsomest creatures in body that God ever made, are not made bent towards the earth, like all other animals, but upwards towards heaven, so that they should symbolize in bodily likeness the spiritual activity of the soul, which must be spiritually upright and not spiritually bent. Notice that I say spiritually, not physically,

upright. How could a soul, which by its nature has nothing physical about it, be turned upright in a bodily sense? No, it cannot be so.

Take care, therefore, that you do not understand in a bodily sense what is meant spiritually, even though it is expressed in bodily words, such as UP or DOWN, IN or OUT, BEHIND or IN FRONT, ON ONE SIDE or ON THE OTHER SIDE. For however spiritual something may be in itself, yet if it is to be spoken about, given that speech is a bodily activity performed by the tongue, a bodily organ, it must always be spoken in bodily words. But does it follow that it must therefore be received and understood in a bodily sense? – no, but spiritually.

Chapter 62

To enable you to know better how to understand spiritually the words that are spoken in a bodily manner, I propose to explain the spiritual significance of some words that relate to spiritual activity; thus you will know clearly and without error when your spiritual activity is below you and outside you, when it is within you and level with you, and when it is above you and below God.

Every kind of bodily thing is outside your soul and below it in nature. Yes, the sun and moon and all the stars, even though they are above your body, are nevertheless below your soul.

All angels and all souls, even though they are reformed by grace and adorned with virtues so that they are above you in purity, are nevertheless only level with your soul.

Within yourself by nature are the faculties of your soul, the three principal faculties being consciousness, reason and will,[89] and the secondary faculties, imagination and sense-perception.

Above yourself in nature there is nothing but God.

When you find ‘yourself’ mentioned in spiritual writings, it should always be understood as your soul and not your body. And the value and nature of the activity of your soul’s faculties must be judged according to that of the objects on which they work, whether below you, within you, or above you.

Chapter 63

Consciousness in itself is a faculty of such a kind that, so to speak, it has no proper activity of its own. But reason and will are both active faculties, and so is imagination and also sense-perception. Consciousness contains and embraces within itself these four faculties and their activities, and it cannot be said to be active unless that containing is an activity. This is why I call some of the soul's faculties principal and some secondary: not because the soul is divisible, which cannot be so, but because the objects on which its faculties work are divisible, some (spiritual things) being principal, and others (bodily things) being secondary. The two principal active faculties, reason and will, work entirely by themselves in all spiritual things, without the help of the two secondary faculties. As with animals, imagination and sense-perception work through the bodily senses, and on all bodily things, whether these are physically present or absent; but by them alone, without the help of reason and will, the soul can never achieve knowledge of the virtue and characteristics of bodily creatures, or of the cause of their being and creation.

This is why reason and will are called principal faculties, because they work in pure spirit, without any kind of bodiliness; and why imagination and sense-perception are called secondary, because they work in the body by means of bodily instruments, namely our five senses. Consciousness is called a principal faculty because it contains within itself spiritually not only all the other powers but also all the objects on which they work. You can see this by experience.

Chapter 64

Reason is the faculty by which we separate bad from good, bad from worse, good from better, worse from worst, and better from best. Previously, before humanity sinned, reason could have done all this work by nature, but now it is so blinded by original sin that it cannot carry out this work unless it is illuminated by grace. And both reason itself and the matter on which it works are embraced and contained by consciousness.

Will is the faculty by which we choose good after it has been identified by reason, and by which we love God, desire God, and finally rest in God with complete joy and consent. Before humanity sinned, the will could not be deceived in its choice, its love, or any of its activities, because then it was able by nature to apprehend everything as it was, but now it cannot do so unless it is consecrated by grace. For frequently, through the infection of original sin, it apprehends as good something that is evil and has only the appearance of good. And both the will and that which it wills are contained and embraced by consciousness.

Chapter 65

Imagination is the faculty by which we form images of all absent and present things; and both it and the matter on which it works are contained by consciousness. Before humanity sinned, imagination was so obedient to reason (to which it is, as it were, a servant) that it never supplied it with any disordered image of a bodily object or any delusion of a spiritual object; but now it is not so. Unless it is controlled by the light of grace in the reason, it will never cease, asleep or awake, to form alien and disordered images of bodily objects, or else some delusion or other, which is nothing but a bodily conception of something spiritual or a spiritual conception of something bodily. This is always deceptive and false, and associated with error.

In those who are newly turned from the world to devotion, this disobedience of the imagination can be clearly recognized when they are praying. For until the time comes when the imagination is to a great extent controlled by the light of grace in the reason – as it is by continual meditation on spiritual matters, such as their own sinfulness, the Passion, the kindness of our Lord God, and many other similar topics – they are quite unable to set aside the strange and alien thoughts, delusions and images that are supplied and imprinted in their minds by the light and ingenuity of imagination. All this disobedience is the punishment for original sin.

Chapter 66

Sense-perception is a faculty of the soul which extends into and rules over the bodily senses, and by which we have bodily knowledge and sensation of all bodily objects, whether pleasing or displeasing. It has two parts, one by which it attends to the needs of the body, another by which it serves the appetites of the bodily senses. It is this faculty that is vexed when the body lacks things that are necessary to it and also, in relieving the need, moves us to take more than we need in gratifying and encouraging our appetites. It is vexed when it lacks the things that please it, and takes lively delight in their presence. It is vexed by the presence of things that displease it, and takes lively delight in their absence. Both this faculty and its objects are contained within consciousness.

Before humanity sinned, sense-perception was so obedient to the will (to which it is, as it were, a servant) that it never supplied it with any disordered pleasure or displeasure in any bodily object, or any spiritual illusion of pleasure or displeasure created in the bodily senses by some spiritual enemy; but now it is not so. Unless it is ruled by grace in the will, to make it endure meekly and in moderation the punishment for original sin (which it feels in being deprived of the pleasure it needs and in the presence of the displeasure that profits it), and to control its appetite in the presence of the pleasure it needs and its lively delight in the absence of the displeasure that profits it, it will wallow so wretchedly and wantonly in the luxuries of this world and the foul flesh, like a swine in the mud, that our whole way of life will be bestial and fleshly rather than human and spiritual.

Chapter 67

Friend in the spirit, through sin we have fallen into the wretchedness you can see around you, so is it surprising if we are blindly and easily deceived in understanding spiritual words and spiritual activity? – especially those of us who do not yet know the faculties of our souls and the ways in which they work. For whenever your consciousness is concerned with anything bodily, to however good an end, in this activity you are below yourself and outside your soul. And whenever you feel your consciousness to be concerned with subtle aspects of the faculties of your soul and their activities in spiritual matters, such as your own vices or virtues or those of any being that is spiritual and level with you in nature, to the end that you should learn by means of this activity to know yourself and thus get nearer to perfection, then you are within yourself and level with yourself. But whenever you feel your consciousness focused on nothing bodily or spiritual, but only on God's own substance, as it is and may be focused through practice in the activity described in this book, then you are above yourself and below God.

You are above yourself, because you succeed by grace in achieving what you cannot achieve by nature, that is, to be united to God in spirit, in love, and in harmony of will. You are below God, because, although it may be said in a way that at such moments God and you are not two but one in spirit – to such an extent that you or anyone else who experiences the perfection of this activity, may truly, as Scripture witnesses,[90] be called a God on account of this union – nevertheless you are still below him. He is by nature God without beginning; and you were at one time nothing in substance, and moreover, when by his power and love you were made something,

you voluntarily made yourself worse than nothing by sin. By his mercy alone, without any desert of yours, you are made a God in grace, united indivisibly with him in spirit, both here on earth and eternally in heavenly bliss. Hence, though you are indeed one with him in grace, you are still very far below him in nature.

Friend in the spirit, from this you can see at least in part that those who do not know the faculties of their own souls and the way in which they work may very easily be deceived in understanding words that are written for a spiritual purpose. And so you can see something of the reason why I dared not openly tell you to show your desire to God, but urged you to do what you can, like a child, to hide and conceal it. And I do this for fear you should interpret in a bodily sense what is meant spiritually.

Chapter 68

Similarly, someone else[91] would tell you to gather your faculties and your senses wholly within yourself, and worship God there; and, even though he spoke well and truly (yes, no man more truly, if he were rightly understood), yet, for fear that you might be misled and understand his words in a bodily sense, I would not like to tell you to do so. Instead, this is what I will tell you. Make sure that you are in no way within yourself; and, to be brief, I do not want you to be outside yourself, or above, or behind, or on one side or the other.

'Where shall I be, then?' you ask. 'Nowhere, by what you tell me!' Now truly, you are right: that is where I would have you, because nowhere in the body is everywhere in the spirit. Take great care, then, that your spiritual work is nowhere in the body; and then, wherever the object on which you are focusing your mind's activity may be in substance, there you will certainly be in spirit, as truly as your body is in the place where you are physically present. And though your bodily senses are unable to find anything there to gratify them, because it seems to them that what you are doing is nothing, work away at this nothing, so long as you do it for the love of God. So do not give up, but labour eagerly in that nothing with an unsleeping desire, longing to have God, whom no one can know; for I tell you truly that I had rather be nowhere in body, struggling with that invisible nothing, than be such a great lord that I could when I wished be everywhere in body, enjoying myself happily with this something like a lord with his possessions.

Give up this everywhere and this something, in favour of this nowhere and this nothing. Do not worry if your senses have no knowledge of this nothing: truly, I love it all the better for that. They have no knowledge of it because it is something so noble in

itself. This nothing can be better felt than seen, for it is quite obscure and quite dark to those who have only been looking at it for a short time; yet, to put it more accurately, in experiencing it a soul is blinded by abundance of spiritual light more than by darkness or lack of bodily light. Who is it that calls it nothing? It is our outer man, to be sure, not our inner. Our inner man calls it Everything; for from it he learns well to have knowledge of all things, bodily or spiritual, without specific regard to any one thing by itself.

Chapter 69

Your feelings will vary extraordinarily as the spiritual experience of this nothing is undergone nowhere. The first time a soul looks at it, he will find pictured upon it all the specific sinful deeds, however secret or obscure, that he has ever committed in body or in spirit since he was born. And however much he turns it round, they will always appear before his eyes, until the time comes when, with much hard work, many sad sighs, and many bitter tears, he has rubbed most of them away.

In this torment it seems to him at times that to look at it is like looking into hell, for he feels that he despairs of getting out of that pain to arrive at perfection of spiritual rest. Many get that far in; but for the intensity of the pain they feel and for lack of comfort they turn back to attend to worldly matters, seeking external fleshly comfort in place of the spiritual comfort they have not yet deserved, as they would have done if they had endured.

For anyone who endures feels some comfort at times, and has some hope of perfection, for he feels and sees that many of the specific sins he has committed are, by the help of grace, largely rubbed away. He does not cease to feel pain from time to time, but he thinks it will have an end, because it is always growing less and less; and so he calls it not hell but purgatory. Sometimes he can find no specific sin inscribed upon it, yet it seems to be sin as a lump, he does not know what, nothing but himself; and then it can be called the stump and the pain of original sin. Sometimes it seems to be paradise or heaven, because of the many wonderful sweetnesses and comforts, joys and blessed virtues, that he finds in it. Sometimes it seems to be God, because of the peace and rest that he finds in it.

Well, let him think what he wants, for he will always find it a cloud of unknowing that is between him and his God.

Chapter 70

So labour hard in this nothing and this nowhere, and leave behind your outward bodily senses and all that they work on, because I tell you truly that this work of contemplation may not be understood by them. With your eyes you cannot conceive of anything except by its length or breadth, its smallness or largeness, its roundness or squareness, its distance or nearness, and its colour; with your ears, only by its noise or some kind of sound; with your nose, only by perfume or stench; with your taste, only by sour or sweet, salt or fresh, bitter or pleasing; and with your touch, only by hot or cold, hard or soft, rounded or sharp. And truly neither God nor spiritual things possess any of these qualities or quantities. So leave behind your outward senses, and do not work with them, either within or without. All those who aim to work at contemplation inwardly, and suppose that they will hear, smell, see, taste or touch spiritual things, either within or outside themselves, are certainly deceived and are working wrongly, against the course of nature. For by nature the senses are fashioned so that by them we should have knowledge of all outward bodily things, and not at all so that we should come to know spiritual things. I mean that by their activities we cannot gain such knowledge. By their failings we can do so: for example, when we read of certain things, or hear them discussed, and recognize that our outward senses cannot tell us what they are by any of their qualities, then we can be truly assured that they are spiritual and not bodily things.

On a spiritual level, it happens inwardly in the same way with our spiritual senses, when we struggle to gain knowledge of God himself. However much spiritual understanding a person may have in knowing about all created spiritual beings, still by the work of his understanding he can never gain knowledge of an uncreated

spiritual being – which is God alone. By the failure of understanding he can do so, because the one thing in which it fails is nothing but God alone. It was for this reason that St Denis said, 'The godliest knowledge of God is that which is known through ignorance.'[92]

Indeed, anyone who will look into the books of St Denis will find that his words clearly confirm all that I have said or will say, from the beginning of this treatise to the end. So far as I am concerned, I do not wish to cite him for any other reason, nor to cite any other authority at this time. At one time, people thought it humility to say nothing in their own words, unless it was confirmed by the words of Scripture or of authoritative teachers, but now this practice has turned into ingenuity and the display of cleverness.[93] For you it is unnecessary, and so I am not doing it. For 'He that hath ears to hear, let him hear',[94] and he who is stirred to believe, let him believe – for otherwise they will not hear or believe.

Chapter 71

Some think this matter so hard and terrifying that they say it cannot be achieved except after great and laborious effort, and can be grasped only seldom, and then at the moment of ecstasy.[95] To these people I will answer, feebly though it may be, with the statement that it is all as God provides and disposes, according to the capacity of the souls of those to whom this grace of contemplation and spiritual activity is given.

There are some who cannot achieve it without great and long spiritual exercise, and even then it will be only seldom, and when specially summoned by our Lord, that they will experience the perfection of this activity: this summoning is called ecstasy. And there are some who are so refined in grace and in spirit, and so intimate with God in this grace of contemplation, that they can have it when they wish in the ordinary state of the human soul, sitting, walking, standing, or kneeling. Yet at the same time they have full and deliberate employment of all their senses, bodily or spiritual, and can use them if they wish – not without some hindrance, but without great hindrance. Moses provides an example of the first, and Aaron, the priest of the temple, of the second.[96]

For the grace of contemplation is symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Law, and those who work in this grace are symbolized by those who were most concerned with this ark, as Scriptural history witnesses.[97] The grace and work of contemplation are well compared to this ark, for just as all the jewels and relics of the temple were contained in the ark, so all the virtues of the human soul, which is the spiritual temple of God, are contained in this little thrust of love.

Before Moses could get to see the ark and know how it was to be made, he climbed to the top of the mount with great and lengthy effort, and remained there and worked in the cloud for six days, staying until on the seventh day our Lord would deign to show him the way in which the ark was to be made. By Moses' lengthy effort and the delayed revelation to him are understood those who cannot achieve the perfection of this spiritual work except after lengthy effort, and then only seldom, and when God deigns to disclose it. But what Moses could get to see only seldom, and not without great and lengthy effort, Aaron had it in his power, because of his priestly office, to see in the temple within the veil as often as he chose to enter. By Aaron are understood all those of whom I spoke above, who, by their spiritual skills and with the help of grace, may make the perfection of this work their own as often as they please.

Chapter 72

From this you can see that someone who cannot get to see and feel the perfection of this activity of contemplation except with great effort, and then only seldom, can easily be deceived if, in speaking and thinking of others, he judges them according to his own experience, assuming that they too can achieve it only seldom, and then not without great effort. And someone who can have it when he wishes may be deceived in the same way if he judges all others accordingly, saying that they too can have it when they wish. Give this up: truly, it should not be thought of like this. Perhaps, when it pleases God, those who can at first have it only seldom, and then not without great effort, will afterwards have it when they wish, as often as they please. An instance of this is provided by Moses, who at first could see what the ark was like only seldom, and not without great effort, on the mount; and subsequently he saw it as often as he pleased in the valley.[98]

Chapter 73

There were three men who were predominantly concerned with the ark of the Old Testament: Moses, Beseleel, and Aaron. Moses learned from our Lord on the mount how it should be made; Beseleel shaped and made it in the valley, according to the pattern that was revealed on the mount; and Aaron had it under his guardianship in the temple, to touch and see it as often as he pleased.

Similarly to these three, we benefit by the grace of contemplation in three ways. Sometimes we benefit only by grace, and then we are comparable to Moses, who, for all the climbing and the effort that were his on the mount, could get to see it only seldom; and the sight was granted only through the revelation of our Lord when it pleased him to reveal it, and not because he had earned it by his effort. Sometimes we benefit from this grace through our own spiritual skill, aided by grace, and then we are comparable to Beseleel, who could not see the ark until he had made it by his own effort, aided by the pattern that was revealed to Moses on the mount. And sometimes we benefit from this grace through the teaching of others, and then we are comparable to Aaron, who had it in his guardianship, and was accustomed when he pleased to see and touch the ark, which Beseleel had previously shaped and made ready to his hands.

Friend in the spirit, in this work of contemplation, though it is childishly and ignorantly described, and though I am a wretch unworthy to teach anyone, I bear the office of Beseleel, as if making this ark for your use and explaining what it is like. But you can work far better and more worthily than I if you will be Aaron – that is to say, if you will work continually at contemplation for yourself and for me. Then do so, I beg you, for the love of God almighty; and

since we are both called by God to the activity of contemplation, I beseech you for the love of God to fulfil on your part what is lacking on mine.

Chapter 74

If it seems to you that this kind of activity does not agree with your inclination in body and soul, you may give it up and safely undertake another way without blame, under the guidance of a reliable spiritual adviser. In that case, I beg you to forgive me, because in this writing I truly wished to benefit you to the best of my humble ability, and that was my purpose. So read it through twice or three times – the more often the better, and the more of it you will understand, so that perhaps some item that you found very hard at the first or second reading will afterwards seem quite easy to you.

Indeed, to my understanding it seems impossible that a soul inclined to this activity should read it or speak of it, or hear it read or discussed, without feeling while doing so a true accord with the purpose of this work. And then, if it seems to do you good, thank God heartily, and for the love of God pray for me.

Do that; and I beg you for the love of God to let no one see this book except those who seem to you to be fit for it, according to what you can find written earlier in the book, where it states who should undertake this activity, and when.[99] And if you do let any such people see it, I beg you to urge them to take time to read it all through. For it may perhaps contain some material in the beginning or the middle which is left incomplete and not fully explained where it stands; but if not there, it is explained soon afterwards, or else at the end. Thus if someone saw one part and not another, he would perhaps be easily led into error; and so I beg you to do as I say.

And if it seems to you that there is any material in it that you would like to have more fully expounded, let me know what it is

and your ideas about it, and I will improve it if I can, to my humble ability.[100]

I do not desire that this book should be seen by worldly chatterers, flatterers and critics, gossips and tattle-tales, for it was never my intention to write of such matters for them. Therefore I would not wish it to be heard by them, or by anyone driven by mere curiosity, whether educated or uneducated, even though they might be people who lead truly good active lives; for it has nothing to do with them.

Chapter 75

Not all who read this book, or hear its subject matter read or discussed, and find what they read or hear good and pleasant, are called by God to undertake this activity, just because of the pleasurable stirring that they experience while reading; for this stirring perhaps comes more from natural inquisitiveness than from any summons by grace. If they want to test where the stirring comes from, though, they can test it in this way, if they please. First let them examine whether they have done their best in advance, preparing themselves for it by cleansing their consciences according to the judgement of Holy Church and with the agreement of their advisers. If so, it is well so far. But if they wish to know more exactly, let them examine whether it is always pressing into their minds, more habitually than any other kind of spiritual exercise. And if it seems that there is nothing they do, in body or in spirit, that is done well enough to satisfy their consciences unless this secret little thrust of love is, as it were, the spiritual crown of all their work – if this is what they feel, then it is a sign that they are called by God to this work; and certainly not otherwise.

I do not say that it will always last and remain continually in the minds of all those who are called to undertake this activity. No, it is not like that. For various reasons, the actual feeling is frequently withdrawn from a young spiritual apprentice in contemplation: sometimes so that he shall not assume too great a familiarity with it and suppose that it is largely in his own power to have when he pleases and as he pleases. Such a belief would be pride; and when the feeling of grace is withdrawn, pride is invariably the cause – not always pride that exists, but pride that would develop if the feeling of grace were not withdrawn. Thus some young fools frequently suppose that God is their enemy, when he is completely their friend.

Sometimes it is withdrawn because of their carelessness, and when this happens they soon afterwards feel a most bitter pain that scourges them very hard. Sometimes our Lord will delay it in accordance with a plan, because by the delay he wishes to make it grow and be held in greater esteem, when what had long been lost is newly found and felt once more. This is one of the most supreme and reliable signs by which a soul may know whether or not he is called to undertake this work. If after such a delay and such lengthy absence of this activity he feels, when it comes suddenly, as it does, without the help of any intermediary, that he then has a more burning desire and a greater love-longing to undertake this activity than he ever had before – so much so that I believe he often has greater joy in finding it than he ever had sorrow in losing it – if this is so, it is surely a true and unquestionable sign that he is called by God to undertake this activity, whatever he may be or may have been.

For God with his merciful eye regards not what you are, or what you have been, but what you want to be. St Gregory bears witness that 'all holy desires grow by delay; and if they shrink by delay, they were never holy desires'.[101] If someone feels less and less joy in once more finding his former supposed desires suddenly present, though they may be called natural desires for what is good, all the same they were never holy desires. Concerning holy desire, St Augustine says that 'the whole life of a good Christian is nothing but holy desire'.[102]

Farewell, friend in the spirit, in God's blessing and mine.[103] And I beseech almighty God that true peace, sound advice, and spiritual comfort in God with abundance of grace, may evermore be with you and all God's lovers on earth. Amen.

HERE ENDS THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING.

The Book of Privy Counselling[1]

Prologue

Spiritual friend in God, with regard to the inner calling to which I believe you to be inclined, on this occasion I am speaking to you in particular, and not to all those in general who may encounter this writing. If I were to write for everyone, I would have to write what would be generally relevant to everyone; but since at the moment I intend to write to you in particular, I shall write nothing but what seems to me most beneficial and relevant to your own inclination. If there is anyone else inclined as you are, whom this writing may benefit as much as you, so much the better; that pleases me well. At the moment, though, your own inward inclination, as I understand it to be, is the sole purpose and object of my concern. To you, then, as representative of all others like you, I say what follows.

Chapter 1

When you come to be by yourself, do not think in advance what you are going to do next, but put aside good thoughts as much as evil thoughts, and do not pray aloud unless you particularly wish to do so; and then, if you do say anything, do not consider how much or how little it may be, and do not worry what it is or what it signifies, whether it is a prayer, or whether it is a psalm, a hymn or an antiphon,[2] or any other kind of prayer, with a general or special intention, be it inward mental prayer composed in thought or outward vocal prayer uttered in words. And see that nothing remains in your active consciousness but a naked purpose reaching out to God, not cloaked in any specific thought of God in himself, what he is in his own nature or in any of his works, but only that he is as he is. Let him be so, I pray you, and do not make him anything else; pry no further into him with intellectual cleverness. Let that belief be your foundation.[3] You must think and feel this naked purpose, freely fixed and rooted in sure belief, to be nothing but a naked thought and a blind awareness of your own existence: as if you said inwardly to God in your mind, 'The fact that I exist,[4] Lord, I offer to you, with no concern for any attribute of your being except simply that you are as you are – nothing beyond that.'

Let this humble darkness be the mirror in which you see yourself and your whole consciousness. Think no further of yourself than I am telling you to do of your God, so that in this way you may be one with him in spirit, without division or dissipation of consciousness. For he is your being, and you are what you are in him, not only as your cause and your being, but because he dwells in you as your cause and being. And so in this work of contemplation think of God as you do of yourself, and of yourself as you do of God, that he is as he is and you are as you are, so that your thoughts are not dispersed or divided, but united in him who is all – always excepting this difference between you and him, that he

is your being and you are not his. For though it is true that all things are in him as their cause and being, and that he is in all things as their cause and being, yet he alone is his own cause and his own being. For as nothing may exist without him, so he may not exist without himself. He is being both to himself and to all things. And that alone separates him from all things, that he is being both to himself and to all things; and the fact that all things have their beings in him and that he is being to all things means that he is one in all things and all things are in him. So your thoughts and feelings must be united in him in grace without separation, with all curious prying into the unfamiliar attributes of your obscure being, or of his, pushed far back; so that your thought may be naked and your awareness undefiled, and, when touched by grace, you, naked as you are, may be secretly sustained in your awareness simply by him as he is – but blindly and in part, which is all that may be in this present life, so that your longing desire may never slacken.

Look up lightly, then, and say to your Lord, either in words or in the purpose of your heart: 'The fact that I exist, Lord, I offer to you, for it is yourself.' And think nakedly, plainly and simply that you are as you are, without any kind of ingenuity.

It takes no great skill to think this, it seems to me, even if it were asked of the most ignorant man or woman living in this world on the most ordinary level of natural intelligence. And so at times I quietly marvel, smiling ruefully, when I hear it said by some people – not simple, uneducated men and women, I mean, but scholars and those of great learning – that what I write to you and others is so difficult and so profound, so abstruse and so ingenious, that it can scarcely be understood by the subtlest scholar or man or woman of intellect alive. So they say; but to these people I must answer that it is greatly to be regretted, and is a matter for merciful scorn and bitter reproof on the part of God and those who love him, that nowadays not just a few people but nearly all in general (except perhaps for one or two in a district among those specially chosen by God) are so blinded by the ingenious cleverness of their learning and natural gifts that they can no more attain a genuine

understanding in truth of spirit of this easy work of contemplation, by which the soul of the simplest uneducated man or woman is united to God in loving humility and perfect charity, than a young child learning his alphabet can understand the knowledge of the greatest university scholar – indeed, their blindness and cleverness means that they understand it less.[5] And on account of this blindness they mistakenly call such simple teaching ingenuity of wit, when, if rightly regarded, it will just be found a simple and easy lesson for a person with no education.

Someone who cannot think and feel that he is – not what he is, but that he is – I consider excessively ignorant and simple. For it is manifestly given to the most ignorant cow or the beast most lacking in reason (supposing it could be said, as it cannot, that one was more ignorant or irrational than another) to be aware of its own existence. Much more then is it given to human beings, who are uniquely endowed with reason above all other beasts, to think and feel their own existence.

Chapter 2

And so descend to the lowest level of your understanding (which some, on the basis of actual experience, hold to be the highest), and think in the most ignorant way (but to some it is the wisest way) not what you yourself are but that you yourself are. For it takes great skill in learning and cleverness on your part, and much intricate searching in your natural intelligence, to think what you are in all your attributes; and with the help of grace you have been doing this now for many days, so that now you know in part, and to the extent that I believe benefits you for the time being, what you are: a man by nature and a filthy stinking wretch by sin. You know well how this is so, and at times perhaps you feel you know too well all the defilements that follow a sinner and belong to him. Shame on them! Let them go, I beg you. Stir them up no further for fear of stench. But to think that you exist is something you can achieve in your own ignorance and simplicity without any great cleverness of learning or natural gifts.

I beg you, therefore, to do no more now in this matter than think bluntly that you are as you are, however filthy a wretch you may be; so long as you have already been properly absolved (as I suppose you have) of all your sins, in general and in particular, in accordance with the true precepts of Holy Church; for otherwise, so far as I am concerned, neither you nor anyone else may be so bold as to undertake this work of contemplation. But if you feel that you have done the best you can, then you should apply yourself to this work. And even though you still feel yourself to be so vile and wretched and so burdened with yourself that you yourself do not know what best to do with yourself, you must do what I am about to tell you.

Take good gracious God as he is, and apply him as straightforwardly as a plaster to your sick self as you are. Or, to put it differently, lift up your sick self as you are and try in your desires to touch good gracious God as he is, for to touch him is eternal health, as is witnessed by the woman in the Gospel who said: *Si tetigero vel fimbriam vestimenti eius, salua ero*, 'If I touch only the hem of his garment, I shall be healed.'[6] Much more, then, will you be healed of your sickness through this high heavenly touching of his own being, his own dear self. Step up stoutly then, and try that remedy; lift up your sick self as you are to gracious God as he is, without any prying or particular concern for any of the many attributes that belong to your own being or to God's, whether they are pure or wretched, divine or human, or come from grace or from nature. Nothing in you matters now except that your blind perception of your naked being shall be carried gladly upwards in eagerness of love, to be linked and united in grace and in spirit to the precious being of God just as he is in himself – nothing more than that.

And although your unruly prying thoughts can find no food for themselves in this kind of activity, so that they will keep on urging you resentfully to give up this work and do something that appeals to their curiosity (for it seems to them that what you are doing is of no value, and that is entirely because they know nothing about it), this would make me love it the better, because from this it appears that it is of greater value than they are. And why should I not love it the better, especially when there is no work that I can do, none that can be done by any of my senses, bodily or spiritual, in their curiosity, that could bring me so near to God and so far from the world as this bare little awareness and offering up of my blind being?

So, although your thoughts can find no food for themselves in this work of contemplation, and therefore would shift you from it, see that you do not give up on their account, but be their master. And do not turn back to feed them, however fierce they may be. You turn back to feed your thoughts when you allow them to range

through the variety of ingenious meditations on the attributes of your being – meditations which, very good and beneficial though they may be, are yet very dispersed in comparison with this blind awareness and offering up of your being, and distract you from the perfect oneness that ought to be between God and your soul. And so press forward on the most profound level of your spirit, which is your being, and do not turn back for anything of any kind, however good or holy the thing may seem that your thoughts would lead you to.

Chapter 3

Follow the counsel and teaching of Solomon, who said to his son: *Honora Dominum de tua substancia et de primiciis frugum tuarum da pauperibus: et inplebuntur horrea tua saturitate et vino torcularia redundabunt*. 'Honour the Lord with your substance, and feed the poor with your first fruits: and your barns shall be filled with abundance, and your presses shall run over with wine.'[7] This is the literal text of what Solomon told his son, but it is as if he meant you to understand it spiritually in the terms I shall address to you on his behalf:

'Spiritual friend in God, see to it that, abandoning all ingenious inquiry with your natural senses, you honour your Lord God completely with your substance,[8] simply and wholly offering your own self up to him, all that you are and such as you are; but do this in general and not specific terms – that is, without specific regard to *what* you are – so that your sight will not be distracted or your feeling defiled, which would make you less one with God in purity of spirit. And feed the poor with your first fruits, that is, with the first of the spiritual or bodily qualities that have grown up in you from the very moment you were created down to this day.'

All the gifts of nature and of grace given you by God are what I call your fruits, and with them in this life you are bound to foster and nourish your brothers and sisters in nature and in grace, both materially and spiritually, as much as your own self. The first of these gifts I call the first of your fruits. The first gift of every creature is simply that creature's being. For though it is true that the attributes of your being are so closely identified with your being itself that they cannot be separated from it, still, because they are all dependent on it, it may truly be called what it is, the first of your

gifts. Thus it is your mere being that is the first of your fruits. If you were to unravel your heart's ingenious concern with one or all of the subtle attributes and admirable characteristics that pertain to humanity's being (and humanity is the noblest of all created things), you would always find that the basic object and goal of your concern, whatever its nature, is your mere being. It is as if in every one of your acts of contemplation, by means of which you prompt yourself to love and praise your Lord God (who not only granted you being but granted you to exist in the nobility to which the attributes of your being bear witness in your contemplation), you were to say to yourself: 'I exist and I see and feel that I exist; and not only do I exist, but I exist in such and such and such ways', reckoning up in your contemplation all the specific attributes of your existence. And then (which is more than all this) it is as if you were to wrap all this up in a more general statement, saying: 'What I am and how I am, in nature and by grace, I have it all from you, Lord, and it is you. And I offer it all to you, above all for your praise, and for the help of all my fellow Christians and myself.' Thus you can see that the origin and object of your contemplation has its essential basis in the bare sight and blind awareness of your own being. And thus it is simply your being that is the first of your fruits.

Chapter 4

But although it is the very first of your fruits, and although the other fruits are all dependent on it, it is of no benefit in the present situation to wrap or enfold your contemplation of it in one or all of its intricate attributes, which I call your fruits and with which you have been preoccupied up to now. It is enough now for you to do complete honour to God with your substance and to offer up the first of your fruits, your naked being, as a continual sacrifice in praise of God, both for yourself and for all others as charity requires – not cloaking it in any attribute or particular aspect that pertains or may pertain to your own existence or anyone else's, as if that would supply the needs, further the well-being, or enhance the progress towards perfection of yourself or anyone else. Let it alone: truly, it cannot be done in this way. For such a blind general regard is of greater service to the needs, the well-being, and the perfecting in purity of spirit of yourself and all others than any more specific contemplation that anyone could have, however holy it might seem.

That this is true is shown by the testimony of Scripture, by the example of Christ, and by human reason. All human beings were lost with Adam when he fell from the love that united him with God; and all who by the works appropriate to their vocation testify to their desire to be saved are and shall be saved by sole virtue of the Passion of Christ. As the truest sacrifice he offered up himself – all that he was, in general and undivided[9] – without regard for any particular living person, but generally and for all in common; and just so, one who in contemplation truly and perfectly sacrifices himself with an intention for all in common does the best he can to unite all human beings to God as effectively as he himself is so united.

No man can show greater charity than thus to sacrifice himself for all his brothers and sisters in grace and in nature.[10] For as the soul is nobler than the body, so the uniting of the soul to God, its life, by the heavenly food of charity is better than the uniting of the body to the soul, its life, by any earthly food in this life. The latter is good to do in itself, but it is never well done without the former. The latter combined with the former is better; but the former by itself is the best. For the latter alone never merits salvation; but the former alone, where abundance of the latter falls short, not only merits salvation but leads to the greatest perfection.[11]

In order to advance in perfection, there is no need now to turn back to nourish your intellectual faculties, as you would do by meditating on the attributes of your being, so as to feed and fill your emotions with loving and pleasant feelings for God and spiritual things, and your understanding with the spiritual wisdom of holy meditations that seek for knowledge of God. For if, as you may by grace, you are always careful to keep yourself unchangingly on the fundamental level of your spirit, offering up to God that naked blind awareness of your own being which I call the first of your fruits, you can be sure that the second, final part of Solomon's teaching will be truly fulfilled as he promises, without any concern on your side to search and rummage with your spiritual senses among any of the attributes that belong either to your own being or to God's.

You must clearly understand that in this work of contemplation you should have no more regard to the attributes of God's being than to the attributes of your own being. For there is no name, feeling or perception more fitting, or even equally fitting, to the eternal, which is God, than what may be gained, seen and felt in blind and loving contemplation of the word IS. For if you say 'Good' or 'Fair', 'Lord' or 'Sweet', 'Merciful' or 'Righteous', 'Wise' or 'Omniscient', 'Mighty' or 'Omnipotent', 'Knowledge' or 'Wisdom', 'Power' or 'Strength', 'Love' or 'Charity', or anything else that may be said of God, it is all hidden and stored up in this little word IS. For him, to be all these is the same as simply to be. If you add a

hundred thousand sweet words such as these – good, fair, and all the rest – you do not depart from this word IS; and if you say them all, you do not add to it; and if you say none of them, you take nothing away from it. So be as blind in loving perception of the being of your God as you are in the naked perception of your own being, without any ingenious searching in your thoughts to enquire after any attribute of his being or yours. Abandoning and thrusting far aside all curiosity, honour your God with your substance, offering all that you are as you are wholly to him who is as he is, him who alone is of himself his own blessed being and yours.

In this way, united with him in a marvellous manner, you will honour God with himself; for what you are you have from him, and it is he. And although you who were once nothing had a beginning in your creation as an individual, your being has always existed in him without beginning and will always exist without ending, like himself. So I proclaim often and proclaim unchangingly:

'Do honour to God with your substance, and benefit all human beings in common with your first fruits; and then your barns shall be filled with abundance.' That is, your spiritual feelings will be filled with abundance of love and of virtuous living in God, your foundation and your purity of spirit. 'And your presses shall run over with wine.' That is, your inward spiritual faculties, which you are accustomed to strain and press together with various ingenious meditations and rational investigations concerning spiritual knowledge of God and yourself, speculating about his attributes and yours, will then run over with wine; and in Holy Scripture the true mystical significance of this wine is spiritual wisdom in true contemplation and profound tasting of the Godhead.

All this will be done suddenly, joyfully and graciously, without any anxiety or labour on your part, solely by the ministration of angels, through the power of this loving blind work of contemplation. For all angels, knowing of this, do special service to it, like a maidservant to her lady.

Chapter 5

In warm commendation of this joyful, prudent work, which in itself is the high wisdom of God graciously descending into the human soul, joining and uniting it to himself in spiritual wisdom and prudence, the wise man Solomon exclaims in these words:

Beatus homo qui inuenit sapienciam et qui affluit prudencia. Melior est adquisicio eius negociacione auri et argenti. Primi et purissimi fructus eius. Custodi, fili mi, legem atque consilium; et erit vita anime tue et gracia faucibus tuis. Tunc ambulabis fiducialiter in via tua, et pes tuus non inpinget. Si dormieris, non timebis; quiesces et suauis erit sompnus tuus. Ne paueas repentino terrore, et irruentes tibi potencias impiorum, quia Dominus erit in latere tuo et custodiet pedem tuum ne capiaris.[12] You are to understand these words as follows. Blessed is the man who can find the wisdom that unifies and who in his spiritual activity can abound with loving wisdom and prudence of spirit, offering up his own blind awareness of his own being, with all ingenious learning and natural knowledge thrust far aside. To obtain this spiritual wisdom and this prudent activity is better than gaining gold or silver. The gold and silver signify morally[13] all other knowledge, bodily or spiritual, acquired by ingenious seeking and working with our natural faculties, beneath us, within us or on a level with us, when considering any of the attributes that pertain to God's being or that of any created thing. And he adds the reason why it is better, saying, because *primi et purissimi fructus eius*. That is, 'because its fruits are the first and purest'. And no wonder, because the fruit of this activity is high spiritual wisdom, suddenly and freely belched up[14] from within the human spirit itself, uncreated, far distant from delusion, beyond all control or subjection to the activity of the natural faculties. Compared with

this, these faculties, however subtle or holy, may be called feigned folly formed in illusion, as far from genuine truth in the light of the spiritual sun as the darkness of moonlight in mist on midwinter night from the brightness of the sun's rays at the clearest moment of midsummer day.

'My son,' he says, 'keep this law and this counsel,' in which all the commandments and counsels of the Old Testament as well as the New are truly and perfectly fulfilled, without any specific concern for any one individually. And the only reason this kind of activity is called a law is that it contains within it every one of the branches and fruits of the law. For, rightly regarded, the foundation and force of this activity will be seen as nothing but the glorious gift of love, in which, as the apostle teaches, the whole law is fulfilled: *Plenitudo legis est dileccio*. 'Love is the fulfilling of the law.'[15]

If you keep this law of love and this living counsel, as Solomon says, it 'shall be life to your soul' inwardly, in tenderness of love to your God, 'and grace to your mouth' outwardly, in the truest teaching and seemliest ordering of your bodily conduct towards your fellow Christians in your outward form of living. On these two, one within and the other without, according to Christ's teaching, 'depends the whole law and the prophets': *In hiis enim duobus tota lex pendet et prophete: scilicet dileccio dei et proximi*.[16]

In this way, therefore, when you have been made perfect in your work both within and without, you will walk confidently, grounded in grace (which is the guide of your spiritual way), lovingly lifting up your naked blind being to the blessed being of God, with which you are one in grace although the two of you are different in nature. 'And the foot of your love shall not stumble.' That is, once you have tested your steadfastness of spirit in your spiritual work, you will not be so easily hindered and pulled back by the ingenious questionings of your subtle intelligence as you are now as a beginner. Or, to put it differently, then the foot of your love will neither trip nor stumble on any kind of illusion caused by your ingenious prying in your thoughts. For in this work, as has been said

before, all ingenious prying by any of your natural faculties is set far behind and completely forgotten for fear of illusion or of any feigned falsehood that might come in this earthly life; for these could defile the bare awareness of your blind being and draw you away from the nobility of this work of contemplation.

For, if any kind of specific thought of anything except your naked blind being (which is your God and your goal) should enter your mind, then you are turned aside and held back to labour in the trickery and ingenuity of thought, which distracts and divides you and your mind both from yourself and from your God. So keep yourself whole and undistracted as far as you can by grace and by the wisdom that comes from spiritual perseverance. For in this blind consideration of your naked being, united to God as I am telling you, you must do everything you do – eat and drink, sleep and wake, walk and sit, speak and be silent, lie down and get up, stand and kneel, run and ride, labour and rest. Each day you must offer this up to God as the most precious offering you can make; and in everything you do it will be the chief of your doings, whether they are active or contemplative. For, as Solomon says in this passage, 'if you sleep' in this blind consideration, oblivious to all the noise and provocation of the fierce fiend, the false world and the frail flesh, 'you shall not fear' any danger or any diabolic delusion.[17] For in this work the fiend is utterly bewildered and blinded in painful ignorance and crazy curiosity about what you are doing. But that does not matter, for 'you shall rest' graciously in this loving union of God and your soul; 'and your sleep shall be very sweet', for it will be spiritual nourishment and inward strength to your body as well as your soul. And soon after this Solomon says: *Vniverse carni sanitas est.*[18] 'It is health to all the frailty and sickness of the flesh.' And fittingly so, for since all sickness and corruption entered the flesh when the soul fell away from this work, all health will return to the flesh when the soul, by the grace of Jesus, the leading worker, rises back to this work. And you can hope to achieve this only by the mercy of Jesus and with your own loving consent. With Solomon in this passage, then, I pray you to stand firm in this work, always

lifting up to him your loving and eager consent. *Et ne paueas repentino terrore, et irruentes tibi potencias impiorum*. ‘And do not be confounded’ by any disquieting fear, though the fiend (as he will) should come ‘with sudden terror’, thrusting and beating against the walls of the house you inhabit, or though he should incite any of his powerful agents to rise up and ‘rush suddenly in at you’, without any warning. Understand very well that that is how it will be, whatever kind of person you may be who apply yourself to work truly at contemplation: you will certainly see and feel, or else smell, taste or hear some cause for confusion made by the fiend in one or more of your five bodily senses. It is all done so as to drag you down from the height of this precious work; and so guard your heart well when this torment comes, and rely with eager confidence on the love of our Lord.

Quia Dominus erit in latere tuo, et custodiet pedem tuum ne capiaris. That is, ‘for our Lord will be at your side’, ready and near to help you, ‘and he will keep your foot’ (that is, the ascent of your love, by which you approach God) ‘so that you will not be taken’ by any trick or guile of your enemies, the fiend with his supporters, the world and the flesh. See, friend, thus our Lord, who is our love, will with power, wisdom and goodness help, preserve and defend all those who, in the loving trust they feel towards him, are willing to abandon utterly their selfpreservation.[19]

Chapter 6

But where shall such a soul be found, so willingly fixed and founded in the faith, so utterly humbled in self-annihilation, and so lovingly led and sustained by the love of our Lord, fully knowing and feeling his universal power, his hidden wisdom and his glorious goodness? – how he is one in all things and all things are in him, so that, without fully yielding up to him all that is from him, by him and in him, a loving soul can never be truly humbled in utter self-annihilation. Such a soul, deeply drenched in God's love, in utter and final abandonment of itself as nothing (or less, if less could be), deserves, by this noble making nothing of self and this high making all of God in perfect charity, to have God with his power, wisdom and goodness helping and preserving and defending it from all adversities, bodily and spiritual, without anxiety or labour, reward or consideration on its own part.

You souls who are only partly humbled, give up your human objections, and do not say, enquiring rationally into it, that such a humble and total abandonment of self-preservation, when a person feels himself touched in this way by grace, is tempting God, because you sense in your reason that you dare not do so yourselves. No, be satisfied with your part, for it is sufficient to save your souls on the level of active life, and leave alone other contemplative souls who dare do this. And do not be astonished or wonder at their words and deeds, even though they seem to you to exceed the scope and ordinary judgement of your reason.

For shame! How often must you read and hear without giving either faith or credence? – I mean to what all the Fathers of the Church before us have written and taught, the thing that is the fruit and flower of all Holy Scripture. It seems that either you are blind

and cannot see and believe what you read or hear, or you are touched with some kind of secret envy, unable to credit that such great good may fall to your fellows because you lack it yourself. You need to be careful, because your enemy is subtle and plans to make you give greater credit to your own understanding than to the sound teaching of ancient Fathers or the working of grace and the will of our Lord.

How often have you read and heard, and from how many holy, wise and true teachers, that as soon as Benjamin was born his mother Rachel died?[20] We understand by Benjamin contemplation and by Rachel reason. As soon as a soul is touched with true contemplation, as it is in this noble making nothing of self and this high making all of God, it is true and certain that straight away the human reason completely dies. And since you read this so often, in the words not just of one or two but of very many most holy and worthy teachers, why do you not believe it? And if you believe it, how do you dare to search and rummage with your reason through the words and deeds of Benjamin? By Benjamin are understood all those who in ecstasy of love are rapt above intellect, as the prophet says: *Ibi Beniamyn adolescentulus in mentis excessu*.[21] That is: 'There is Benjamin a youth, in ecstasy of mind'. See to it, then, that you are not like those wretched earthly women who kill their own children when they are newly born. In your blindness and lack of experience, it is well to beware that you do not aim the point of your presumptuous spear at the power, wisdom and will of our Lord with what boldness you can, as if to bring him down when you suppose you are doing your best to uphold him.

At the earliest beginnings of Holy Church, in the age of persecution, many and varied souls were so marvellously touched by the sudden coming of grace that, without being prepared by any previous religious exercises, handicraftsmen suddenly threw down their tools and school children their wax tablets,[22] and ran without rational questioning to be martyred with saints; so why should we not believe that now, in the age of peace, God may, can and will,

and, yes, does touch various souls equally suddenly with the grace of contemplation? And I believe that in his great grace he will do this to chosen souls. For he wishes to be known befittingly in the end, to the wonder of the whole world. Such a soul, lovingly making nothing of itself and nobly making all of its God, shall most graciously be preserved against overthrow by its spiritual or bodily enemies by the goodness of God alone, with no anxiety or labour on its own part; for reason itself demands that God should faithfully preserve all those who, in dedication to his love, abandon and choose not to preserve themselves. And no wonder if they are marvellously preserved because they are so perfectly humbled in the boldness and strength of their love.

If anyone dares not do this, and speaks against it, either the Devil is in his breast robbing him of the loving trust he should have in his God and the goodwill he should have towards his fellow Christians; or he is not yet as perfectly humbled as he needs to be, I mean if he aims at the truly contemplative life. Do not be dismayed, then, to be humbled towards your Lord, or to sleep in this blind perception of God as he is, oblivious to all the noise of this wicked world, the false fiend and your frail flesh; for our Lord will be ready to help you and preserve your footing so that you will not be taken.

This work of contemplation is rightly compared to a sleep. For as in sleep the use of your bodily senses is suspended, so that the body can rest completely, sustaining and strengthening its physical powers, just so in this spiritual sleep the unruly questionings of the untamed spiritual senses, speculations arising from mental images, are firmly bound and completely deprived of their force, so that the blessed soul can sleep softly and rest in loving perception of God as he is, fully sustaining and strengthening its spiritual powers.

So bind down your thoughts when you offer up this naked blind awareness of your own being, and always ensure, as I have often said, that it *is* naked, and not cloaked in any attribute of your being. For if you cloak it with any attribute, such as the nobility of your being or any other individual quality that pertains to human existence as opposed to that of any other creature, then you

immediately give food to your thoughts, by which they have occasion and power to draw you to many things, thus distracting you, without your knowing how. Be wary of this deception, I beg you.

Chapter 7

Perhaps now, though, following the subtle judgement of your prying thoughts, which know nothing about it, you are marvelling somewhat at this work of contemplation, and are suspicious of it. That is not surprising, because up to now your thoughts have been too clever to know anything about any such activity. And perhaps you are asking in your heart how you can know whether this work is pleasing to God or not; or, if it is pleasing, how it can be as pleasing as I say it is. My answer is that this question is provoked by intellectual curiosity, which will never let you consent to this work until it is satisfied by some convincing argument. And I shall offer no resistance, but shall make myself partly like you, gratifying your proud intellect, so that afterwards you will be like me, following my advice without setting limits to your humility. For, as St Bernard testifies, 'Perfect humility sets no limits.'[23]

You set limits to your humility when you will not follow the advice of your spiritual master unless your intellect can see that it ought to be done. So here you can see that I desire mastery over you. So I do, truly, and I intend to have it![24] I believe that love prompts me to this more than any capacity I feel in myself in the way of great knowledge or contemplative activity or the level of my life. May God put right what is wrong, for he knows fully, and I only in part.

But now, to gratify your proud intellect, I tell you truly in commendation of this contemplative work that if a soul engaged in it had tongue and language to say what it feels, all the scholars of Christendom would wonder at its wisdom. Yes, and by comparison, all their great learning would seem manifest foolishness; so no wonder if I cannot tell you the excellence of this work with my clumsy, beastlike tongue. And God forbid that the work itself should

be defiled by being distorted by the wagging of a fleshly tongue! No, it may not be, and certainly it will not be, and God forbid that I should desire it! For everything that is spoken about contemplation is not the thing itself but is only about it. But now, since we cannot speak it, let us speak about it, to confound intellectual pride, and especially yours which, on this occasion at least, is the sole reason for my present writing.

I ask you first, what is perfection of the human soul, and what are the properties belonging to this perfection? Answering on your behalf, I say that perfection of the human soul is nothing other than a union brought about between it and God in perfect charity. This perfection is so high and pure in its nature, beyond human understanding, that it cannot be known or perceived in itself; but where the properties belonging to it can be truly seen and perceived, there it is likely that its substance abounds. And so, in order to explain why this spiritual exercise is more noble than all others, we need to know what are the properties belonging to perfection.

The properties belonging to perfection, which every perfect soul needs to possess, are virtues. Now, if you will closely examine this work in your soul, and the property and characteristics of each separate virtue, you will find that all virtues are clearly and completely contained within it, without any deflection or corruption of intention. I will not mention any specific virtue here, because that is unnecessary; you have found some mention of them in various other places in my own writings. For the work in question, rightly understood, is the reverent affection and the fruit separated from the tree that I refer to in your little *Epistle on Prayer*. This is *The Cloud of Unknowing*; this is that secret thrust of love in purity of spirit; this is the Ark of the Testament.[25] This is Dionysius's *Theology*, his wisdom and his treasure, his bright darkness and his ignorant knowledge.[26] This is what makes you silent in thought as well as in speech. This makes your prayer very short.[27] By this you are taught to forsake and despise the world.

Chapter 8

What is more, by this you are taught to forsake and despise yourself, according to Christ's teaching in the gospel, where he says: *Si quis venire post me, abneget semetipsum; tollat crucem suam et sequatur me*.[28] That is: 'Whoever will come after me, let him forsake himself, let him bear his cross and follow me'. In relation to our present subject, it is as if he meant you to understand: 'Whoever will come humbly, not with me but after me, to the bliss of heaven or the height of perfection'.[29] For Christ went ahead by nature, and we come after by grace. His nature is more excellent than grace, and grace is more excellent than our nature. And by this he lets us know clearly that the only way we can follow him to the height of perfection, as comes about in the practice of this work of contemplation, is if we are guided and led by grace.

That is completely true. For you must understand clearly, you and all those like you who may read or hear this writing, that though I urge you so plainly and boldly to apply yourself to this work, all the same I feel sure, without doubt or error, that almighty God in his grace must always be the principal mover and worker, either with or without intermediary, and that you or anyone like you must only consent and submit. During the act of contemplation, however, this consent and submission must be actively inclined towards contemplation and made capable of it in purity of spirit, and fittingly raised up to your Master, as you can be taught by experience in the spiritual perception of your soul.

And since it is the case that God of his goodness moves and touches various souls in various ways, some with and some without intermediary,[30] who dares to say that God will not move you through this writing, you or anyone like you who may either read or

hear it, with myself as a mere intermediary? – unworthy as I may be except for his revered will, by which it pleases him to do whatever pleases him. I believe it will be so: your experience of contemplation will be the test of this. I beg you, therefore, to prepare yourself to receive this grace from your Lord, and hear what he says. 'Whoever will come after me' (in the way mentioned above) 'let him forsake himself.' I beg you, how can someone better forsake himself and the world, and better despise himself and the world, than by disdaining to think of any attribute of his and its being?

Know for certain that, although I urge you to forget everything but the blind awareness of your naked being, what I want (and this has been my intention from the beginning) is nevertheless that you should forget even the awareness of your own being in favour of awareness of God's being. That was the reason why I showed you at the beginning that God is your being. But it seemed to me that, on account of your inexperience in spiritual awareness, you were not yet capable of being lifted up at a stroke to spiritual awareness of God's being; and so, to enable you to climb up to it step by step, I told you first to gnaw away at the naked blind awareness of your own being, until the time when, by spiritual perseverance in this secret work, you would become capable of the high awareness of God. For your own intention and desire when you engage in the work of contemplation must always be to experience God. So although at the beginning, because of your simplicity and spiritual immaturity, I tell you to cloak and enfold awareness of God in awareness of yourself, afterwards, when perseverance has made you wiser in purity of spirit, you must strip, despoil and completely unclothe yourself of every kind of awareness of yourself, so that you can be clothed in the gracious awareness of God's self.

This is the true nature of a perfect lover, simply and completely to strip himself of himself for the sake of the thing he loves, and not to permit or allow himself to be clothed in anything but the thing he loves; and that not only for a time, but to be enveloped in it unendingly, in utter and final forgetfulness of himself. This is the work of love that can be known to no one but the person who

experiences it. This is the teaching of our Lord when he says, 'Whoever will love me, let him forsake himself', as if to say, 'Let him strip himself of himself if he wishes to be truly clothed in me, who am the ample garment of love that will last for ever and never end.'

Therefore, whenever you consider your contemplative activity and see and feel that it is yourself you are feeling and not God, you must be earnestly sorrowful, and long wholeheartedly to feel God, always desiring without cease to escape from the miserable knowledge and foul feeling of your blind being; and aim to flee from yourself as from poison. And then you will forsake yourself and fiercely despise yourself, as our Lord commands. When you long so singlemindedly, not to cease to exist – for that would be madness and would show contempt for God[31] – but to escape from the knowledge and feeling of your existence (which must always happen, if God's love is to be felt as perfectly as it may be in this life), you will see and feel that you cannot possibly achieve your goal. However careful you may be, a naked awareness of your mere existence will always follow you and accompany your doings, unless rarely, for some brief moment, God will permit you to feel himself in abundance of love. This naked awareness of your mere existence will always force itself above you, between you and your God, just as when you begin the attributes of your existence will force themselves between you and yourself: then you will feel your self to be a most heavy and painful burden. Yes, may Jesus help you then, for then you need his help! – for all the misery that can exist other than that is nothing alongside it. Then you are your own cross; and this is true contemplation and the way to our Lord, as he says himself: first 'Let him bear his cross', in the pain he feels in himself, and then 'follow me' into blessedness or into the height of perfection, tasting the tenderness of my love in the divine experience of myself. You can see, then, that you need to desire sorrowfully to escape from the feeling of yourself, and painfully bear the burden of yourself as a cross, before you can be made one with God in spiritual feeling of himself, which is perfect charity. And once you have been touched and marked in spirit by

this grace, you will be able to see a little of the surpassing excellence of this work, and have some feeling of it.

But, I beg you, how could you achieve this contemplative work by the use of your intellectual faculties? Never, surely; not even by good means, by your subtle and ingenious imaginings and meditations, no, not even if they concern your sinful way of life, the Passion of Christ, the joys of our Lady,[32] or all the saints and angels in heaven, or again any attribute, fine quality or characteristic that belongs to your existence or God's. I would certainly rather have a naked blind feeling of myself, of the kind I mentioned before – not of my deeds, but of myself. (Many people call their deeds themselves, but it is not so; for I who do them am one thing, and my deeds that are done are another.[33] The same is true of God: he is one thing in himself, and his works are another.) It would be better to have my heart dissolved in tears for want of the feeling of God and for the painful burden of myself, and to have my loving desire kindled for the feeling of God, than all the subtle and ingenious imaginings or meditations that can be told or found written in books, however holy they might be and however beautiful they might seem to the subtle eye of your ingenious intellect.

Chapter 9

All the same, these beautiful meditations are the truest way for a sinful beginner to attain spiritual feeling of himself and of God. And, though God can do what he will, to me it would seem impossible in human terms for a sinner to attain tranquillity in spiritual feeling of himself and of God unless he first saw and felt by imagining and meditation the bodily actions of himself and God, and then sorrowed for the actions that required sorrow, and rejoiced for those that required rejoicing. Anyone who does not come in by this way does not come by the right way; and so he must wait outside – and that is what he is doing when he most believes himself to be inside.[34] For many believe that they are inside the spiritual door, and yet they are standing outside, and must do so until they humbly seek for the door. And there are some that find the door soon, and enter sooner than others; and that is entirely on account of the doorkeeper, not of any worth or desert of their own.

The household of the spirit is marvellous, because its Master is not only the doorkeeper himself, he is also the door. He is the doorkeeper through his Godhead, and the door by his Manhood. He says himself in the gospel: *Ego sum ostium. Per me si quis introierit, saluabitur; et siue egredietur siue ingredietur, pascua inueniet*.[35] *Qui vero non intrat per ostium sed ascendit aliunde, ipse fur est et latro*.[36] In relation to our present subject this is to be understood as if he said: 'I am almighty by my Godhead, and as doorkeeper may lawfully let in whom I will, and by whatever way I will; yet, because I wish there to be a plain public way and an entrance open to all who wish to come in, so that no one may have the excuse of not knowing the way, I have clothed myself in ordinary human nature, and made

myself so accessible that by my Manhood I am the door, and anyone who enters by me will be saved.'

Those who enter by the door are those who, when meditating on the Passion of Christ, lament their wicked deeds which cause that Passion, bitterly reproving themselves because they deserved to suffer and did not, and feeling pity and compassion for that good Lord who suffered so shamefully and did not deserve to suffer at all; and then they lift up their hearts to the love and goodness of his Godhead, in which he deigned to humble himself so low in our mortal manhood. All these enter by the door, and they shall be saved. And whether they go in, meditating on the love and goodness of his Godhead, or out, meditating on the suffering of his Manhood, they will find spiritual food enough for their devotions, sufficient and abounding for the well-being and salvation of their souls, even though in this life they never come further in.

And anyone, whoever he may be, who does not enter by this door, but climbs up another way to perfection by the subtle prying and ingenious deluded activity of his wild unruly intellect, abandoning the plain public entrance mentioned above and the sound advice of spiritual directors, is not just a thief by night but a pilferer by day. He is a thief by night, because he walks in the darkness of sin, presumptuously relying on the independence of his own intellect and will more than on any sound advice or on the plain public way just mentioned. He is a pilferer by day, because, under pretext of leading a pure spiritual life, he plucks the outward signs and words of contemplation without having its fruit. And so, because he feels within him at times a pleasant longing, however slight, to come nearer to God, he is blinded by this pretext and supposes that everything he does is good enough, when it is the most dangerous purpose possible – for a young man, ungoverned by advice, to follow the fierceness of his desire; especially when his desire is set on climbing independently to high things, not only above himself but above the plain public way of Christians just mentioned, which I call, in accordance with Christ's teaching, the door of devotion and the truest entrance to contemplation possible in this life.

Chapter 10

Now let us proceed with the topic in this book that especially concerns you and all others who resemble you simply in being disposed towards contemplation. If this is the door, what follows? Is someone who has found it to keep on standing at it, or in the doorway, without coming further inside? Answering on your behalf, I say that it is good for him to continue to do so, until his conscience and his director bear witness that the thick rust of his crude bodiliness has been largely rubbed away; and especially until he is called further inside by the secret teaching of the Holy Spirit, for this teaching is the clearest and surest testimony available in this life that a soul is called and drawn further inside to experience the more intimate work of grace.

A person can have evidence of being touched in this way if, as he continues in his religious exercises, he feels a kind of quiet growing desire to get nearer to God in this life, for example by a special feeling in his spirit when he hears contemplation discussed or finds it written about in books. For if a person is not stirred by a growing desire to get nearer to God when he hears and reads about spiritual work, and especially in his daily exercises, let him continue to stand at the door, as one called to salvation but not yet to perfection.

Let me warn you of one thing. Whoever you may be who read or hear what I have written, especially in this place where I distinguish between those who are called to salvation and those who are called to perfection, whichever group you feel your vocation belongs to, see that you neither judge nor debate what God does or what human beings do, beyond what concerns yourself alone – not whom he stirs and calls or does not call to perfection, nor, as to length of time, why he calls one person sooner than another. If you wish to

avoid error, do not judge, but simply hear and understand. If you are called, give praise to God, and pray that you do not fall; and if you are not yet called, pray humbly to God that he will call you when he wishes. Do not teach him what he must do; let him alone. He has power, wisdom and will enough to do the best for you and all who love him.

Be at peace with your lot. Whichever falls to you, there is no need to complain, for they are both precious. The first is good, and wholly necessary. The second is better, whoever can seize it; or, to speak more truly, whoever by grace is seized and called to it by our Lord.

We may press forward in our pride and stumble at the goal; but truly without him what we do is nothing, for he says himself: *Sine me nichil potestis facere*.[37] This is to be understood as: 'Without me as instigator and first mover,[38] while you merely consent and submit, you can do nothing that is perfectly pleasing to me', in the way that the work described in this book should be.

Chapter 11

I say all this to confound the mistaken presumption of those who, in the ingenuity of their learning or natural intelligence, always want to be the chief workers themselves, with God just submitting or only consenting, when in reality the opposite is true in contemplative matters. In these matters alone are all the ingenious arguments of learning or natural intelligence pushed far aside, so that God can be the principal worker. In legitimate matters belonging to the active life, however, human learning and natural intelligence can work side by side with God, though only with his consent in spirit, as established by these three witnesses – Scripture, spiritual direction, and accepted custom in matters of nature and rank, age and temperament. Thus you must not follow your spiritual promptings, however pleasing or holy they may seem – I mean in matters of active life – unless they are within the scope of your learning or natural ability, however strongly they may be supported by one or all of the witnesses previously mentioned. In truth it is very reasonable that a man should be more than his deeds. It is on this account that, according to the statutes and ordinances of Holy Church, no man can be admitted to prelacy, which is the highest stage of active life, unless the duties of that office are shown by the testimony of true judgement to come within his ability. Thus in matters of the active life human learning and natural ability must chiefly predominate, along with God's gracious consent as tested by these three witnesses – and rightly so, for all active matters are subordinate and subject to human wisdom. But in contemplative matters the highest wisdom that humanity as such can achieve is pushed far down, so that God may be the chief worker, and man do nothing but consent and submit.

Thus I understand this statement in the Gospel, *Sine me nichil potestis facere*– that is, 'Without me you can do nothing' – as applying to actives in one way and to contemplatives in another. In actives God has to be present, permitting or consenting or both, for anything to be done, whether or not it is legitimate and pleasing to him; in contemplatives, he must be the chief worker, asking of them nothing but their submission and consent. So, to put it in general terms, in all our actions, legitimate and illegitimate, active or contemplative, without him we can do nothing. He is with us in sin only by permitting it and not by consenting to it, to our final damnation unless we humbly repent. In actions that are active and legitimate, he is with us both by permitting them and by consenting to them, to our reproof if we backslide and our great reward if we advance. In actions that are contemplative he is with us as chief instigator and worker, while we only submit and consent, to our great perfection and our soul's spiritual union with him in perfect charity. Given that all human beings in this life can be divided into three groups, sinners, actives and contemplatives, this statement of our Lord's has a general application to everyone in the whole world: 'Without me' – only permitting and not consenting in sinners, or else both permitting and consenting in actives, or, greater than all this, as chief instigator and worker in contemplatives – 'you can do nothing'.

Well, I have used many words to convey a simple meaning. But all this was said to let you know in which things you must set your intellectual faculties to work and in which you must not; and how God is with you in one activity and how in another. Again, perhaps, by knowing this you may avoid deceptions into which you might have fallen if it had not been explained. So, since it has been said, let it be, even though it may not be very relevant to our subject; and now let us proceed.

Chapter 12

You may ask me this question: ‘By what sign or signs, if you please, can I soonest know unmistakably whether this growing desire that I feel in my everyday spiritual work, and this pleasant stirring that I experience in reading and hearing about contemplation, is really a summons from God to a more special activity of grace, as described in this book; or whether it is to nourish and sustain my spirit, encouraging it to remain still and to continue working in ordinary grace – what you call the door and public entrance for all Christians?’

The best answer I can manage is this. You can well see that in this book I have listed two kinds of witness you should use to test whether God is calling you in spirit to this work of contemplation, one internal, the other external. In this case it seems to me that neither of the two can be fully sufficient without the other; but where both are found together and in agreement, that is adequate evidence, with nothing more needed.

The first of the two witnesses, which is internal, is the growing desire that you feel in everyday spiritual work. What you must know about this is that although it is an activity of the soul that is blind[39] in itself – for desire is to the soul just as touching and walking are to the body, and you know well that touching and walking are both blind bodily activities – yet, however blind it may be, it is accompanied and followed by a kind of spiritual sight, which partly causes it and is partly a means of promoting it. So pay careful attention to the intrinsic nature of your everyday spiritual exercise. If it is recollection of your sinfulness, the Passion of Christ, or any such matter belonging to the public entrance for Christians mentioned previously; and if the spiritual insight that accompanies

and follows your blind desire arises from these common meditations, then to me that is certainly a sign that the growth of your desire is only nourishing and sustaining your spirit to remain still and go on working in common grace, and is not a calling or stirring by God to any more special grace.

Now the other, second, external witness is a pleasant stirring that you feel when reading or hearing about this matter of contemplation. I call this external, because it comes from without, through the windows of your bodily senses, as by hearing and seeing while you are reading. Now, with regard to this second witness, if it happens that the pleasant stirring you feel while hearing or reading about this matter lasts or continues with you only for as long as you are reading or hearing, and ceases then or soon afterwards, so that you do not wake or sleep in it or with it, and especially that it does not pursue you in your daily exercise, as it were getting and thrusting itself between you and it, stirring and leading your desire; this is a sign, and a true one in my view, that the pleasant stirring you feel in hearing and reading about this is just the natural joy that every Christian soul feels in hearing or reading about the truth (and especially whatever subtly discusses and truly explains the properties of perfection that are most fitting to the human soul, of God's perfection above all); and it is not a touch of spiritual grace or a summons by God to any more special working of grace than that which is the door and public entrance for all Christians.

It can happen, though, that the pleasant stirring you feel in reading and hearing about this matter is so plentiful that it goes with you to bed, rises with you in the morning, follows you about all day in everything you do, tears you away from your accustomed daily exercise and gets between it and you, accompanies and follows your desire so closely that it all seems to be one desire or you cannot tell the difference, changes your gestures and makes your behaviour becoming. While it lasts, everything comforts you and nothing can trouble you. You would run a thousand miles to talk in person with someone you knew to have truly experienced it; and yet when you

get there, let him speak who will, you can say nothing, for it is all you wish to speak of. Your words are few, but full of fruit and fire. A brief word that you speak contains a whole world of wisdom, yet it seems mere foolishness to those who remain in their senses. Your silence is sweet, your speech most profitable, your prayers are secret, your pride most guiltless, your behaviour is humble, your cheerfulness mild, your delight is pleasure in playing with a child.[40] You love to be solitary and sit by yourself; people would hinder you, you feel, unless they were contemplating with you. It does not please you to read or hear any book except about contemplation, so that your internal and external witnesses are both in harmony and joined as one.

Yes, and if both these witnesses with all the supporting indications just listed cease for a time after you have had one or all them, and you are left seemingly destitute of this new fervour and equally of your old accustomed meditations, so that you seem to fall between two stools, possessing neither and lacking both; do not be too depressed by this, but put up with it humbly and patiently await our Lord's will. For now, to use an analogy, you are on the spiritual sea, crossing over from bodiliness to spirituality.

Many great storms and temptations, perhaps, will rise up at this point, and you will not know where to run for assistance. Everything is missing from your feelings, both common and special grace. Do not be too afraid, though you seem to have reason enough; but have a loving trust in our Lord, however little you can achieve for the moment, for he is not far away. He will look up, perhaps very soon, and touch you again with a more fervent stirring of his grace than any you have ever felt before. Then you are completely restored and all is well enough, it seems – for as long as it lasts. For suddenly, before ever you know it, it has all gone, and you are left abandoned in the boat, blown adrift, now this way, now that, you do not know where or whither. Yet do not be dismayed, for he will come, I promise you, very soon, when he chooses to relieve you, and with his might set you free from all your trouble, far more gloriously than he ever did before. Yes, and if he goes

again, he will come back again; and each time, if you behave with humble submission, he will come more gloriously and joyfully than the last. And he does all this because he wants you to become as pliant[41] to his will spiritually as a kid glove is to your hand bodily.

Since he sometimes goes and sometimes comes, he will secretly test you doubly by this double movement and will fashion you to his own motions. By withdrawing your fervour (something that feels to you like his departure, though it is not so), he in tends to test your patience fittingly. For you must understand that, though God may on occasion withdraw these sensations of sweetness, these fervent feelings and burning desires, that does not mean that he withdraws his grace from those he has chosen. For I certainly cannot believe that his special grace can ever be withdrawn from his chosen ones who have once been touched by it, unless deadly sin were the reason. But the sensations of sweetness, the fervent feelings and burning desires, which in themselves are not grace but signs of grace, these are often withdrawn to test our patience, and often to benefit us spiritually in many other ways, more than we suppose. Grace is so exalted in its nature, so pure and so spiritual, that it cannot be experienced by our senses. The signs of it may be, but not grace itself. Thus at times our Lord will withdraw your fervent sensations both to establish your patience and to test it; and not only for this reason but for many others, which I will not set down at this time. Let us proceed with our subject matter.

By the quality, frequency and growth of the sensations mentioned previously (which you feel to be his coming, though it is not so) he will nourish and sustain your spirit to persevere and to live in love and worship of him. Thus in both ways, by your patience in the absence of these sensations, the signs of grace, and by his life-giving nourishment and loving sustenance of your spirit when they are present, he will make you so joyfully submissive and so pleasingly pliant to perfection and to spiritual union with his will, a union which is perfect charity, that you will be as willing and glad to forgo such sensations if he wills it as to possess and experience them continuously throughout your life.

Now your love is both pure and perfect. Now it is that you see your God and your love, and nakedly feel him too, by spiritual union with his love at the highest level of your spirit, as he is in himself (though blindly, in the way possible here), totally stripped of yourself and nakedly clothed in himself as he is, unclothed and not cloaked in any of the physical sensations, however sweet or holy they may be, that can occur in this life. In purity of spirit he is perceived and felt intrinsically and perfectly as he is in himself, far removed from any delusion or false opinion that can occur in this life.

To your understanding as you feel or see in this way, this sight and feeling of God as he is in himself can no more be distinguished from God in himself than God himself can be distinguished from his own being, with which he is one in both essence and nature. So that as God cannot exist apart from his own being because of their oneness in nature, so the soul that sees and feels in this way cannot exist apart from the thing that it sees and feels because of their oneness in grace.

Chapter 13

See then that in this way and by these signs you can somewhat feel and partly test the manner and quality of your calling and of the stirring of grace in your inward spiritual activity and your outward reading or hearing of this matter. There are very few who are at once so specially touched and marked by this grace that they can soon or suddenly have experience, truly felt, of all these signs. It is enough, though, to have some one or two of them, even without having them all immediately; and as soon as you, or anyone like you in spirit, feel that you have had real experience of some or all of them, confirmed by true judgement of Scripture and of your director and your conscience, it will be beneficial for you to cease from the elaborate meditations and subtle imaginings of the attributes of your being and God's, and of your works and God's, by which your intellect has been fed and you have been led from worldly and bodily concerns to your present capacity for grace; and to learn how you should be engaged spiritually with feelings of yourself and of God, about whom you have previously learned so well by the activities of thought and imagination.

Christ illustrated this in his earthly life; for if had been the case that there was no higher perfection in this life than loving meditation on his Manhood, I believe he would not have ascended into heaven before the end of the world, or withdrawn his bodily presence from his intimate lovers on earth. But because there was a higher perfection open to human beings in this life, namely a pure spiritual experience of love of his Godhead, he said to his disciples, who were reluctant to forgo his bodily presence (as you are, in part and in a way, to forgo your ingenious meditations and elaborate subtle thoughts), that it was for their benefit that he departed from

them in body: *Expedit vobis ut ego vadam*;[42] that is, 'It is beneficial to you that I go bodily from you'. On this text the Doctor comments that 'unless the shape of his Manhood is withdrawn from our bodily eyes, the love of his Godhead cannot be fixed in our spiritual eyes'.[43] And so I say to you that it is beneficial at times to cease from the ingenious activity of your intellect and to learn to taste something of the love of your God in your spiritual feeling.

Chapter 14

With the aid of grace that comes in advance, you will arrive at this feeling in the way I am explaining; that is, by always relying without cease on the naked feeling of yourself, always offering your being to God as the most precious offering you can make. But, as I have often said, be careful that it is naked, for fear of deception. If the feeling is naked, then at first it will be very painful for you to remain in it for any length of time; and, as I have said before, that is because your intellectual faculties find no food in it. But no matter for that, for that makes me love it the better. Let them fast for a while, I beg you, from their natural delight in knowledge; for, as is well said, man naturally desires to know;[44] but he certainly cannot taste spiritual feeling of God except by grace alone, however much knowledge he has by learning or by nature. So I beg you to seek feeling rather than knowledge; for knowledge often deceives with pride, but humble loving feeling cannot delude. *Sciencia inflat, karitas edificat.*[45] In knowing is labour, in feeling is rest.

But now you may say: what is this rest of which you are speaking? – for it seems to me that it is labour and distress, and not rest. When I apply myself to doing what you say, I find in it distress and struggle on all sides. On the one hand, my intellect wants me to stop, and I will not; and on the other hand I want to feel God and be without feeling of myself, and I cannot. So struggle and pain are all around; and it seems a strange rest of which you are speaking.

My answer is that you are not used to this work, and for that reason it is more painful to you. But if you were accustomed to it, and knew from experience what benefit was in it, you would not willingly leave it for all the bodily joy and rest in the world. Yet it is a great pain, and a labour too. But I call it rest in that the soul is not

in doubt as to what it must do, and also because it is granted certainty that, while engaged in this activity, it will not go far astray.

An Epistle on Prayer

Spiritual friend in God, with regard to your question to me how you should govern your heart at times when you are praying, my answer, for what little it is worth, is this. It seems to me that at the very beginning of your prayer (whatever prayer it may be, long or short) it would be very beneficial for you to tell your heart clearly and without concealment that you are going to die at the end of your prayer, and, unless you complete it quickly, before you reach its end. Understand that what I am telling you is no pretence, and this is why: because truly, there is no one living on earth who dares venture to say the opposite (that is, that you are going to live longer than your prayer lasts); and so you may safely think this.

And my advice is to do so, because, if you do, you will see that, what with general consideration of your sinfulness and this particular consideration of the shortness of the time that you have for reform, it will set real fear at work in your heart.[1] And you will feel it inescapably at work in your heart, unless it should happen (which God forbid) that you flatter and beguile your false, blind, unregenerate heart with lies and false, deceptive promises of longer life. For though it may in fact be true that you are going to live longer, it is always a false lie for you to think so beforehand and to promise it to your heart. For the truth of this matter lies in God alone, and for you there is nothing but to a wait his will blindly, without certainty of a single instant[2] (which is as brief as the twinkling of an eye, or even briefer). And so, if you wish to pray wisely, as the prophet tells you when he says in the psalm, *Psallite sapienter*,[3] see that from the beginning you really feel this fear at work within you; for, as the same prophet says in another psalm,

Inicium sapiencie est timor Domini, that is, 'The beginning of wisdom is fear of our Lord God'.[4]

But because there is no sure standing on fear alone, for fear of sinking into excessive despondency, you must bind to your first thought the following second thought. You must think steadfastly that if by the grace of God you can distinctly utter the words of your prayer and get through it to the end, or if you die before you get to the end, so long as you do the best you can, it will be acceptable to God as full amends for all your heedlessness from the beginning of your life up to that moment – I mean, given that, guided by your knowledge and your conscience, you have previously been duly absolved of your sins in confession according to the established rules of Holy Church. Brief as it is, this short prayer will then be acceptable to God for your complete salvation if you should die at that moment, and for a great increase in perfection if you should live longer. Such is the goodness of God, who, as the prophet says, forsakes none who truly trust in him with the will to reform.[5]

And since all reform consists of two things, avoiding evil and doing good, there is no readier means of achieving these two than the effect on the spirit of the two thoughts just mentioned. For what more readily takes the love of sin away from us than the real effect of the fear of death? And what more fervently moves us to doing good than a sure hope of the mercy and goodness of God, which is brought about by the second thought? For to be touched in spirit by this second thought, when it is firmly linked in this way to the first, will be a sure staff of hope to support you in all your good actions.

With this staff you can safely climb up to the high peak of perfection, that is, the perfect love of God, even though, as you will hear later, this beginning may be imperfect. For, what with your general consideration of the mercy and goodness of God and the special feeling you experience of his mercy and goodness in accepting this brief little service for such prolonged heedlessness (as if, as was said previously, it were full satisfaction for heedlessness so great), you cannot fail to feel a great stirring of love towards him

who is so good and merciful to you. This is what will be clearly revealed to you by the steps taken with your staff of hope while you are praying, if you do exactly as I have been telling you. The spiritual experience which is the outcome of this exercise simply consists of a reverent affection felt towards God while praying, brought about by fear as the basis of the exercise and by this stirring of love that arises from the spiritual steps taken with the staff of hope just mentioned. For reverence is nothing but fear and love mingled together, with a staff of certain hope. The result of this exercise, in my view, is devotion; for devotion, as St Thomas the Doctor says, is nothing but a readiness of the human will to do the things that belong to the service of God.[6] Let everyone try this for himself, for anyone who serves God in this way can feel how ready his will is to do so. St Bernard seems to me to agree with this when he says that everything should be done swiftly and gladly.[7] See why: swiftly out of fear, and gladly out of hope and loving trust in his mercy.

What is more, I would certainly rather have the reward of someone who perseveres in prayer of this kind, even though he should never do bodily penance on this earth beyond what Holy Church prescribes for him, than that of all those who have done penance on this earth, from the beginning of the world until this day, *without* prayer of this kind. I do not say that the thought of these two considerations is so very meritorious in itself; but the reverent affection which these two thoughts are supreme means of gaining on man's side, that is what is as meritorious as I say. And this alone by itself, without any other kind of exercise – such as fasting, waking, wearing hair shirts, and all such practices – this alone is pleasing to almighty God and merits his reward, and it would be impossible for any soul to have God's reward without it. And the amount of the reward will exactly correspond to the amount of this affection: whoever has much of it will have a great reward, and whoever has less will have a lesser reward. And all the other practices, such as fasting, waking, wearing hair shirts, and so on, are meritorious just as far as they are helpful in achieving this affection;

so that without it they are worthless, and the affection without them is on occasion completely sufficient by itself, and very many people frequently reach it and achieve it with real desert without any of the other practices. I say all this because I want you, by knowing it, to value and praise each thing according to what it is, more if it is worth more and less if less. For ignorance is frequently the cause of great error. And ignorance frequently makes people value and praise bodily exercises, such as fasting, waking, wearing hair shirts, and so on, more than they do the practice of spiritual virtues or the reverent affection mentioned previously. And so, in order to explain more fully the reward and the value of this reverent affection, I will say a little more about it than I have done so far, so that by my explanation you may be better instructed about this practice than you are at present.

The whole exercise of reverent affection referred to above, when preceded and brought about by the two considerations of fear and of hope, could well be compared to a tree full of fruit. Fear is the part of the tree enclosed in the earth, that is the root, and hope is the part above the earth, that is the trunk and branches. In so far as hope is certain and stable, it is the trunk; in so far as it stirs people to deeds of love, it is the branches. But the fruit is always this reverent affection; and for as long as the fruit is fastened to the tree, it retains some of the tree's green smell; but when it has been separated from the tree for a certain time and is completely ripe, it loses all taste of the tree,[8] and what was previously food only for servants is now food for the king. So set yourself to separate the fruit from the tree and to offer it up by itself to the high king of heaven. And then you will be called God's own child, loving him with a pure love for himself and not for his good gifts.

What I mean is this. The numberless good deeds that almighty God in his gracious goodness has performed for each soul in this life are fully and more than fully sufficient reasons for each soul to love him with all its thought, with all its understanding, and with all its will. But suppose it were possible, as it never can be, for a soul to be as powerful, as noble, and as wise as all the saints and angels in

heaven gathered into one, and not to have received this nobility from God, and never in this life to have been shown kindness by God; still, such a soul, seeing God's intrinsic loveliness in all its abundance, would be ravished beyond resistance to love God till its heart burst, so lovely and so delectable, so good and so glorious, is he in himself. Oh what a wonderful thing and how high a thing to speak of is God's love! – a thing of which no one can speak in such a way that its smallest part can be thoroughly understood, except by impossible examples that exceed human understanding. And this is what I mean when I say, 'loving him with pure love for himself and not for his good gifts'. It is not as if I said (though I could well say this), 'much for his good gifts but incomparably more for himself'; for, to speak more profoundly in explaining what I mean about the perfection of this reverent affection and about its reward, I say that a soul, touched in its feelings by the sensible presence of God as he is in himself and as he is in a perfect soul, and illuminated in its reason by the clear beam of everlasting light which is God, so as to see and feel the loveliness of God in himself, such a soul has for that time and that moment[9] lost all recollection of any good deed or other kindness that ever God did to him in this life; so that at that time he neither feels nor sees any reason for loving God other than God.

It may be said, when speaking of ordinary perfection, that the great goodness and great kindness that God has shown us in this life are high and noble reasons for loving God; yet, with regard to the target and bull's-eye of perfection (to which my intention is to draw you in the purpose and manner of this writing), a perfect lover of God, for fear of missing his perfection, now, at the height of perfection, seeks no other reason for loving God but God himself. It is in this sense I say that pure love is loving God for himself and not for his good gifts.

And so, following the lines of my parable, set yourself to separate the fruit from the tree and to offer it up by itself to the king of heaven, so that your love may be pure. For always, as long as you offer him fruit that is green and hanging on the tree, you can well

be compared to a woman who is not pure, because she loves a man more for his possessions than for himself. See why I draw this comparison: because it appears that fear of your death and the shortness of time remaining to you, along with hope of being forgiven for all your heedlessness, are what make you as reverent as you are in God's service. And if it is so, then your fruit has a green smell of the tree. And although this partly pleases God, all the same it does not please him perfectly, and that is because your love is not pure. It is pure love when you ask God neither for release from punishment nor for increase of reward, nor even for the sweetness of his love in this life – unless it happens that you desire the sweetness at a particular time, to refresh your spiritual powers so that they do not fail on the way – but when you ask God for nothing but himself. And you have neither care nor concern whether you will be in pain or in bliss, so long as you have him whom you love. This is pure love. This is perfect love. And so set yourself to separate the fruit from the tree, that is, to separate your reverent affection from the thoughts of fear and hope that precede it, so that you can offer it ripe and pure to God by itself – caused not by the mingling with him of anything beneath him (even if it were the chief of these causes), but only by him alone.

And then it brings as great a reward as I say. For to all those who have experience in the science of theology and of the love of God it is known clearly and without doubt that whenever someone's affection is stirred towards God with no intermediary, that is without any specific thought as precursor to cause that stirring, it merits everlasting life. A soul that is disposed in this way (that is to say, that offers the fruit when it is ripe and separates it from the tree) can be raised up to God numberless times in an hour, suddenly and without intermediary; and for this reason it merits more greatly than I can say to be raised up to joy through the grace of God, who chiefly brings this about. And so set yourself to offer the fruit ripe and separated from the tree.

For all this, the fruit on the tree, offered continually so far as human frailty permits, merits salvation. But the ripe fruit, separated

from the tree and suddenly offered to God without intermediary – that is perfection. You may see from this that the tree is good, even though I urge you to separate the fruit from it so as to gain greater perfection. Thus I am setting it in your garden, because I want you to gather the fruit from it and keep it for your Lord; and also because I want you to know what kind of exercise joins a human soul to God and makes it one with him in love and harmony of will.

This accords with the words of St Paul: *Qui adheret Deo, unus spiritus est cum illo*, that is, 'Whoever draws near to God', as happens through a reverent affection of the kind I have been discussing, 'he is one spirit with God'.[10] That is, even though God and he are two and are distinct in nature, they are so linked together in grace that they are only one spirit; and this is on account of their oneness in love and harmony of will. In this oneness is made the marriage between God and the soul[11] which will never be broken except by deadly sin, even though the heat and fervour of this exercise may cease for a time. Feeling this oneness in spirit, a loving soul may, if it pleases, both say and sing these holy words written in the Bible in the Song of Songs: *Dilectus meus mihi et ego illi*, that is, 'My beloved to me and I to him',[12] understanding by this, 'shall be joined with the spiritual glue of grace on his part and with loving consent in gladness of spirit on yours'.

Therefore climb up this tree, as I said at the beginning, until you get to the fruit, that is to the reverent affection (which will always be in you if you first think earnestly of the other two considerations and, as I said, do not deceive yourself with any lie); and then you must pay careful heed to the activity that is brought about in your soul at that time, setting yourself, as far as you can through grace, to humble yourself beneath God in his majesty, so as to become accustomed to that activity, achieving it at other times by itself, without climbing up to it by any thought. And it is this, for certain, that brings such a great reward as I said. And the longer it is kept from the tree (that is to say, from any thought), and the more often this is done spontaneously, eagerly, and lovingly, without

intermediary, the sweeter it smells, and the better it pleases the high king of heaven; and whenever you feel sweetness and comfort in what you are doing, it is because he is breaking the fruit and giving you a share of your own present.

The fact that at first you feel this exercise to be so hard, straining your heart so harshly and comfortlessly, means that the greenness of the fruit hanging on the tree, or else newly plucked, is setting your teeth on edge. It is beneficial to you all the same, for it is not reasonable that you should eat the sweet kernel without first cracking the hard shell and biting off the bitter bark. But if it happens that your teeth, meaning your spiritual powers, are weak, then my advice is that you should look for stratagems, for 'Skill is better than brute force'.[13]

There is another reason why I am setting this tree in your garden so that you can climb up by it. For though it may be the case that God can do whatever he wishes, yet in my view it is impossible for anyone to attain the perfection of this activity unless these two intermediaries, or some other two that are analogous to them, come first. And yet the perfection of this activity is itself spontaneous and without intermediaries. And so I advise that these should be yours – not yours by right (for to say that is merely sinful), but yours as a gracious gift from God, and delivered by me as a messenger, unworthy though I am. For you must know that every thought that stirs you to good, whether it comes from within by your angelic messenger[14] or from without by some human messenger, is just an instrument of grace, given, sent, and chosen by God himself to act within your soul.

That is the reason why I advise you to take these two before all others. For as a human being is a thing composed of two substances, one bodily and the other spiritual, it needs to have two different means by which to gain perfection. Since both these substances are to be united in immortality at the resurrection on the last day, each substance must be raised to perfection in this life by an appropriate means. These are fear for the bodily substance and hope for the

spiritual, and it seems to me most fitting and suitable for this to be so. For as there is nothing that will so readily snatch the body from all affection for earthly things as will a palpable fear of death, so there is nothing that will so readily and fervently raise the affection of a sinful soul to the love of God as will a sure hope of being forgiven for all its heedlessness. That is why I have directed that you should climb by these two thoughts.

But if it happens that you are taught by your good angel within your spiritual understanding, or else by another man, of two others that are more suited to your disposition than you find these two to be, you may safely adopt them and give up these, without any blame. All the same, till I am better informed, it appears to my understanding that these two would be very helpful to you, and not much unsuited to your disposition, according to what I know of you. And so, if you find that they do you good, thank God heartily; and for the love of God, pray for me. Do this, because I am a sinner, and you do not know how things are with me. No more for now, but receive God's blessing and mine.[15] Read this often; do not forget it; put it vigilantly into practice; and avoid all hindrance and occasions of hindrance, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

NOTES

The Mystical Theology of St Denis

1. *written… Timothy*: See introduction, pp. xvi–xvii

2. *the Abbot of St Victor*: That is, Thomas Gallus, a canon regular of the Congregation of St Victor in Paris, who in 1218 became Abbot of Vercelli in Italy. The *Cloud* author makes use of three of his writings about Pseudo-Dionysius, the *Paraphrase* or *Extractio*, the *Commentary* or *Explanatio*, and the *Gloss*.

3. *transcendent Godhead*: The ME text has *souereyn Goddesse*, which may be a misunderstanding of the Latin *superdea*.

4. *the divinely created wisdom of Christians*: The wisdom that brings knowledge of God and that is created by God, who is himself 'Wisdom without beginning' (ME *vnbigonne*).

5. *that do not rely on intellectual sight*: That is, those that abandon intellectual striving in favour of love.

6. *negation*: ME *doing awey*, literally 'removal'.

7. *made… place*: Psalm 17:12: 'And he made darkness his covert, his pavilion round about him'.

8. *the prophet*: Gallus's *Paraphrase* refers to Job 28:20–21: 'Whence then cometh wisdom? And where is the place of understanding? It is hid from the eyes of all living: and the fowls of the air know it not.'

9. *natural philosophy*: That is, all the systems of knowledge that have to do with the material world.

10. *Bartholomew*: One of the twelve apostles. This statement is also quoted in the life of Bartholomew in the *Legenda aurea*, the standard medieval collection of saints' lives; see Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton, 1993), vol.

II, pp. 109–16. The source of the statement has not been identified. No authentic writing of Bartholomew's is known, and no such statement is found in the widely-read apocryphal *Gospel* (or *Questions*) *of Bartholomew*.

11. *enter… above all*: See Exodus 20:21: 'Moses went to the dark cloud wherein God was'; Psalm 96:2, 9: 'Clouds and darkness are round about him… For thou art the most high Lord over all the earth: thou art exalted exceedingly above all gods'.

12. *humblest of men*: Numbers 12:3: 'For Moses was a man exceeding meek above all men that dwelt upon earth'.

13. *purified… defilement*: Exodus 19:10–11, 14–15. God tells Moses, 'Go to the people, and sanctify them today, and tomorrow; and let them wash their garments. And let them be ready against the third day: for on the third day the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai… And Moses came down from the mount to the people, and sanctified them. And when they had washed their garments, he said to them: Be ready against the third day, and come not near your wives.'

14. *many sounds… beams*: Exodus 19:16: 'And now the third day was come, and the morning appeared: and behold, thunders began to be heard, and lightning to flash, and a very thick cloud to cover the mount. And the noise of the trumpet sounded exceeding loud…'

15. *And afterwards… grace*: Exodus 24:1–2, 10: 'And he said to Moses, Come up to the Lord, thou, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the ancients of Israel. And you shall adore far off. And Moses alone shall come up to the Lord; but they shall not come nigh: neither shall the people come up with him… And they saw the God of Israel…'

16. *Moses… unknowing*: Exodus 24:13–14, 18: '… and Moses going up into the mount of God, said to the ancients: Wait ye here till we return to you… And Moses, entering into the midst of the cloud, went up into the mountain…'

17. *Here… size*: The example of the statue concealed within the block and waiting to be revealed by the removal of all that is

extraneous to it is of Neoplatonic origin (for example, Plotinus, *Enneads* 1. 6. 9). In the Greek of Pseudo-Dionysius the block seems to be of marble, but the *Cloud* author, greatly amplifying the analogy, has brought it into a concrete medieval context (and thereby complicated the thought) by making it of wood. For discussion of the contradictory senses of the word 'image' in the example, see introduction, pp. xxxvii–xl.

18. *unlikenesses*: ME *diuersitees*, i.e. representations that differ from what they aim to represent (here, God as he is).

19. *powerful*: ME *stronge*, which might also be a form of *straunge*, 'foreign', 'alien'.

20. *Hierarchies of Heaven… Militant*: These are the works usually known as the *Heavenly Hierarchies* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*. (See *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, New Jersey, 1987), pp. 143– 259.) The *Cloud* author probably knew these only by reputation. They are not mentioned in his sources.

21. *On God's Names*: The *Divine Names*.

22. *On the Compendium… Meanings*: Usually called the *Symbolic Theology*. This work is now lost.

23. *what are the divine forms… instruments*: The forms in which he appears, for example a 'voice'; *figures*, for example, comparisons of God to a lion or wind; *parts*, for example, God's 'face'; *instruments*, for example the trowel that Amos sees him holding (Amos 7:7).

24. *And then… have life*: The bracketed words do not appear in the two manuscripts, but editors agree that some such addition is required by the argument.

The Cloud of Unknowing

1. *God… Amen*: This prayer is a translation of the collect (the prayer before the epistle) of the Mass of the Holy Spirit.

2. *educated or uneducated*: ME *lettred or lewed*, literally ‘literate or ignorant’: these terms vary widely in meaning according to context, but here probably refer to knowledge or ignorance of Latin, the traditional language of theology and other branches of learning.

3. *I do not desire… helped by it*: The warning in the prologue against allowing the book to be seen by any except those seriously dedicated to contemplation is not uncommon in advanced devotional writings, but is here expressed with unusual force and exactness.

4. *List of chapters*: For annotation of the summaries in this list, see the notes on the chapters themselves.

5. *work*: That is, that of contemplation.

6. *enemy*: That is, the Devil.

7. *counsel*: That is, the guidance of your spiritual director.

8. *bridegroom*: One of the few places where the *Cloud* author adopts the nuptial imagery of the Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon), in which the bridegroom was interpreted as God or Christ and the bride as the human soul (or sometimes the Church or the Blessed Virgin).

9. *flies*: See Ecclesiastes 10:1, ‘Dying flies spoil the sweetness of the ointment’. Flies were often interpreted as spiritual dangers. Satan was known as ‘lord of the flies’.

10. *stirring*: That is, movement, prompting, impulse. This is the author’s own term, frequently used, and retained in the translation because there is no single Modern English equivalent.

11. *do what you can*: ME *do that in thee is*. This phrase, quite often used by the *Cloud* author, was familiar in the context of fourteenth-century controversy about the means to salvation. The theologians known as the *moderni* (now often referred to as nominalists) argued that someone, perhaps even a pagan, could earn God’s grace by ‘doing what was in him’, i.e. doing the best he could according to his lights. Their opponents argued that this theory restricted God’s freedom to grant or refuse grace as he chose.

12. *cloud of unknowing*: For the reason (God's absolute incomprehensibility) why this cloud separates the soul from God, see *The Mystical Theology of St Denis*.

13. *naked purpose*: ME *nakid entent*. This phrase, a favourite of the *Cloud* author's, implies both a purpose focused on God for his own sake, stripped of self-will and of desire for anything to be gained from him, and a simple intention, stripped of imagery.

14. *instant*: ME *athomus*, from a Greek word meaning 'indivisible', also used in I Corinthians 15:52, where the Douai and Authorized Versions have 'the twinkling of an eye'. This was understood in the Middle Ages to be the smallest unit of time, equivalent to fifteen ninety-fourths of a second.

15. *how you have spent it*: See St Anselm: '… what reply will you make in that day when at the twinkling of an eye an account is demanded of you for all the time that has been dealt out to you? How have you expended it?' (*The Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm*, trans. Benedicta Ward, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 222).

16. *reformed by grace… soul*: That is, restored by divine grace to the state of innocence before the Fall, as in St Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:2: 'And be not conformed to this world; but be reformed in the newness of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and the acceptable and the perfect will of God.'

17. *For by circumscribing… likeness*: God adapted himself to humanity by being born as a man; the human soul is adapted to God because humanity was originally created in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26).

18. *pain*: ME *pyne* – the medieval word means both 'pain' and 'punishment'.

19. *nothing is more precious than time*: This saying was often attributed to St Bernard, though no specific source has been discovered. In the medieval encyclopaedia *On the Properties of Things*, translated by John Trevisa from Bartholomaeus Anglicus, the same saying is attributed to St Augustine. Trevisa continues: 'of every possession two may be had together and no more, but two

moments may not be had together' (ed. M. C. Seymour, *et al.*, Oxford, 1975, vol. I, p. 518). 'Time' can also mean 'opportunity', and in this sense it is drawn into the group of meanings mentioned in note 21.

20. *and not man for time*: Compare Mark 2:27: 'The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath'. Time was often at issue in fourteenth-century controversies about predestination and free will, in which it was argued, for example, that God in his absolute power could reverse the temporal order he had ordained, but that he chose not to do so in order to preserve human freedom of choice.

21. *Love… common*: In what follows, the author adapts the language of commerce and accountancy (profit, partnership, auditing, etc.) to apply to a universal economy of love in a way that may startle modern readers, though it goes back to Scripture (for example, many of Jesus's parables) and has numerous parallels in religious writing.

22. *in keeping time*: This puzzling statement may perhaps allude to the timeliness of Mary's response to the exact moment of the Annunciation ('Behold the handmaid of the Lord') when Gabriel, announcing God's plan for her, addressed her as 'full of grace' (Luke 1:38, 28).

23. *naked being*: That is, his bare existence, stripped of all his specific attributes. See also note 13 above.

24. *religious*: That is, as members of religious orders.

25. *Mary*: Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha in Luke 10:38–42; see chapters 17–22 and note 38 below.

26. *corporal works of mercy*: These were defined by the Church as feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, harbouring the stranger, visiting the sick, ministering to prisoners, and burying the dead.

27. *living and dead*: Medieval Catholicism emphasized that the living and the dead formed a single community.

28. *venial sin*: That is, one which does not deprive the soul of sanctifying grace; less grave than a deadly sin, which, if not confessed, brings about eternal damnation.

29. *father*: That is, spiritual director.

30. *Envy*: Hatred or enmity is one meaning of envy in the Middle Ages.

31. *Lechery*: The author has listed the dangerous consequences of worldly thoughts under the headings of the traditional Seven Deadly Sins.

32. *garment you wore*: The author is thinking of a hair shirt or mail shirt worn next to the skin as a form of self-mortification.

33. *will still be in you*: The author was writing in an age when extremes of bodily self-mortification were common among the devout, especially on the continent; see, for example, Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago, 1984), chapter 5.

34. *best part*: See chapter 21.

35. *humility and charity*: Humility is considered at length in chapters 13–23, charity in chapters 24–5.

36. *contrition… satisfaction*: Contrition, confession and satisfaction are the three stages of penance, required of all Christians at least once a year by the bull *Omnis utriusque sexus*, issued at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The author is careful to stress that the personal union with God which is the goal of contemplation is not independent of the requirements of the Church as an institution, but can only be achieved once they have been fulfilled.

37. *when he commands… by nature*: Matthew 5:48: 'Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect'.

38. *Thy sins are forgiven thee*: Luke 7:48. The woman to whom Jesus addressed these words is not named in Luke 7. Because she is described as 'a woman that was in the city, a sinner' (Luke 7:37), she was identified in the Middle Ages with the supposedly notorious sinner Mary Magdalene, out of whom Jesus cast 'seven devils' (Luke 8:2), and who then repented. Mary Magdalene was in turn identified

with the Mary of Bethany who was the sister of Martha and Lazarus (Luke 10:38–42, John 11:1–2); see chapters 17–22. For a study of this composite figure, see Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (London, 1993).

39. *because she loved greatly*: Luke 7:47: 'Many sins are forgiven her because she hath loved much'.

40. *precious and blessed body*. Christ's 'precious and blessed body' is a major focus of the main stream of late-medieval devotion; the *Cloud* author uses the familiar distinction between Mary and Martha to justify his divergence from that stream as well as to expound the differences between action and contemplation.

41. *It is written… at his feet*: Luke 10:38–42.

42. *raised to whatever height of ecstasy*: ME *so highe rauischid*– erotic language adapted to form the technical terminology of mysticism.

43. *And of these… for falling*: See chapters 52–9.

44. *You are full… many things*: Luke 10:41.

45. *But one thing is necessary*: Luke 10:42.

46. *Wherever the best… third in number*: In his minute analysis of the Biblical text, the author draws out the logical implication of the superlative form 'best', as opposed to the comparative 'better'. This was a normal medieval way of reading the Bible, based on the assumption that, since it was the word of God, even the smallest grammatical features of the Vulgate text must be meaningful.

47. *as stated above*: See chapter 8.

48. *But of these… away from her*: Luke 10:42.

49. *Let them sit… best part*: The final statement attributed to God is meant ironically: actives are mistaken to think of the life of contemplatives as a matter of rest and ease, and that there is something wrong with them. But the ME word here translated as 'ease' is *pley*, a term sometimes used to refer to contemplation, though *werk* is by far the commoner word in the *Cloud*.

50. *Chapter 22*: See note 38. It must also be understood in this chapter that Simon the Pharisee of Luke 7:36–47 was identified with Simon the leper of Mark 14:3–9.

51. *This is… an angel*: John 20:11–13; Matthew 28:1–7.

52. *Yes, and more… ill of her*: Luke 7:36–47.

53. *I say this… beforehand*: It was generally held that a bishop should not license anyone to enter a solitary life without the assurance of adequate material provision.

54. *God sends the cow, but not by the horn*: A medieval proverb meaning that God helps those who help themselves.

55. *Mary*: Mary Magdalene, as in chapter 22.

56. *For Christ… the limbs*: I Corinthians 12:12ff.

57. *moderation*: ME *discrecion*. The ME word has a wide semantic range, which also includes discretion, discrimination and judgement. The concept is discussed further in chapters 41–2.

58. *his subjects*: See Genesis 1:28, where man is told to 'rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth' – here apparently identified with his own appetites.

59. *Note well… not withdrawn*: The author's point is that though God may, if he chooses, grant his grace to a habitual sinner, he can also be expected to withdraw it, once granted, on account of any further sin.

60. *master*: ME *hosbonde*; the ME word means 'householder' but also 'husband' thus it could evoke the idea of God as the bridegroom of the soul, as in allegorical readings of the Song of Songs (see note 8 above).

61. *intermediary*: ME *menes*; translated also, in the next sentence but one, as 'means', and a few sentences further on as 'intermediate activities'. *Menes* is frequently used by the *Cloud* author and other devotional writers to refer generally to any thing, process, method, or person that may come between the soul and God.

62. *another book written by someone else*: This is generally thought to be Walter Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, Book I.

63. *OUT!*: There is no exact modern equivalent to this interjection, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, as 'An

exclamation expressing lamentation, abhorrence, or indignant reproach'.

64. *short prayers pierce heaven*: This was a widely used proverbial phrase. No precise source is known, but it may have originated as a conflation of Matthew 6:7 ('And when you are praying, speak not much, as the heathens') and Ecclesiasticus 35:21 ('The prayer of him that humbleth himself shall pierce the clouds').

65. *It is at… height of God*: Ephesians 3:17–19: 'being rooted and founded in charity, you may be able to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth; to know also the charity of Christ'.

66. *Surely he will have… by grace*: God's mercy is an aspect of his very being, whereas human mercy comes only by divine grace.

67. *as if slipping asleep*: ME *as it were in a slepyng sleight*, perhaps with a pun on *sleight*, 'trick' (thus 'as if pretending to be asleep') and *slaght*, 'spell (of sleep)'.

68. *not only* what *he is but* that *he is*: To feel *what* one is means to experience one's individual nature; to feel *that* one is means to experience something more fundamental, the fact of one's existence.

69. *the mount of perfection*: This alludes to mount Sinai, to which God descended to deliver his commandments to the chosen people, and which the author sees as analogous to the highest level of contemplation. The specific teaching he has in mind is probably not the commandments themselves but Jesus's words in Luke 14:26, 'If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, *yea and his own life also*, he cannot be my disciple', and perhaps also John 12:25, 'He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world keepeth it unto life eternal.'

70. *Yet in all this… its existence*: In stating that it would be diabolical madness for the soul to desire not to exist, the author is denying a view expressed in some advanced mystical writings, such as the *Mirouer des simples aâmes anienties* of Marguerite Porete, who was burned for heresy in 1310. In this work she states that the soul must

recognize that its own existence means that God cannot be all in all (I Corinthians 15:28), and is therefore evil.

71. *Chapter 45*: The 'carnal and physical' understanding of spiritual language attacked in this chapter is no doubt that found in the writings by and attributed to Richard Rolle (see introduction, p. xiv), which were widely read at the time.

72. *fire of love*: This is the title of one of Rolle's Latin works (*Incendium Amoris*).

73. *with skill rather than with brute force*: The ME reads *more with a list then with any lither strengthe*, a proverbial phrase. *List* can mean 'skill', 'joy', or 'eagerness'.

74. *beast-like heart*: ME *beestly herte*; this alludes to the recollection in Hebrews 12:20 of Moses' warning to the Israelites not to approach mount Sinai when God descends to deliver the ten commandments, 'And if so much as a beast shall touch the mount, it shall be stoned' (cf. Exodus 19:12–13: 'Every one that toucheth the mount, dying he shall die. No hands shall touch him, but he shall be stoned to death, or shall be shot through with arrows: whether it be beast, or man, he shall not live').

75. *dry and barren of knowledge of grace*: The ME reads *ful drie fro any wetyng of grace*, with a probable pun on *wetyng*, which can mean either 'knowledge' or 'wetting'.

76. *like a father with his child*: The idea of God as a parent who plays a kind of loving hide-and-seek with the contemplative is found in other devotional writings, sometimes (as in the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Riwle*) with God as mother.

77. *someone else*: Probably Walter Hilton, in Book I of his *Scale of Perfection* (see introduction, p. xiv).

78. *merely its accidents*: *substance* ('essential nature') and *accidents* ('inessential qualities') are terms derived from Aristotle which came to form a fundamental opposition in medieval scholastic thought. According to the orthodox theory of the eucharist, which was disputed in the late fourteenth century by Wyclif and his followers, the Lollards, the accidents of the bread and wine remain unchanged

when consecrated, while their substance is transformed into the body and blood of Christ.

79. *weepings*: These have not been previously mentioned, but copious and sometimes uncontrollable tears were a common expression of late-medieval religious devotion, especially among women. A well-known, though somewhat later, English example is Margery Kempe (see introduction, p. xv).

80. *staggering*: ME *sturdy*, referring to a brain disease that makes sheep stagger in circles.

81. *heretics*: The author is likely to have been thinking of the Lollards, who formed the only English heretical movement in his time (see introduction, p. xvi).

82. *People dedicated… Holy Church*: Among worldly supporters of heretics, the author could have had in mind John of Gaunt, Richard II's uncle, who for a time protected Wyclif against his orthodox enemies.

83. *Yet they do… of his disciples*: St Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier of pagan family; he divided his cloak to share it with a beggar, had a vision of Jesus in heaven wearing the half he had given away, and was impelled by this to be baptized (see *Legenda aurea*, chapter 166). St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, before being stoned to death, 'looking up steadfastly to heaven, saw the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God' (Acts 7:55). Christ's bodily ascension into heaven in his disciples' presence is recounted in Mark 16:19 and Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9–10 specifies that he was taken up 'while they looked on' and 'while they were beholding him going up to heaven'.

84. *He says this himself in the Gospel*: In Matthew 25:40 Jesus says that at the Last Judgement the blessed will be told, in relation to the corporal works of mercy, 'As long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me.'

85. *So let us… sweet kernel*: The distinction between the shell or husk and the kernel was frequently used as a metaphor for that

between the outward, literal meaning of a text and its inner, spiritual meaning.

86. *heretics*: Again probably the Lollards, who opposed nearly all outward observances. The *Cloud* author is treading a narrow path between the excessive and over-literal concern for bodily practices to which medieval Catholic orthodoxy tended and the total rejection of such practices found among the Lollards.

87. *No man… love of man*: John 3:13: 'And no man hath ascended into heaven, but he that descended from heaven, the Son of man who is in heaven.'

88. *our life is in heaven*: Philippians 3:20: 'But our conversation is in heaven…'

89. *consciousness, reason and will*: The word translated as 'consciousness' here is ME *mynde*, to which no single modern term corresponds; it names the semantic area bounded by mind, memory (cf. 'keep in mind') and awareness. Medieval thinkers generally identified the 'three principal faculties of the soul' as memory, intelligence (or reason) and will, but what is said about *mynde* in the next chapter seems to apply better to consciousness than to memory. The *Cloud* author's source for this section is the *Benjamin Major* of Richard of St Victor (died 1173), prior of the Abbey of St Victor in Paris, and one of the most influential medieval writers on mystical theology, from whom the author also adapted his *Benjamin Minor*.

90. *as Scripture witnesses*: See Psalm 81:6, 'I have said: You are gods'; and John 10:34, where Jesus quotes this verse in answer to the Jews' claim that he is blaspheming in calling himself God: 'Is it not written in your law: I said, you are gods?' The *Cloud* author is anxious to avoid the heresies that can easily arise from the concept of deification; contemporary versions of them flourished on the Continent in writings such as those of Meister Eckhardt and Marguerite Porete.

91. *someone else*: Again probably Hilton; see for example his *Scale of Perfection*, ed. Underhill, 1:80: 'And therefore turn home again in thyself, and hold thee within and beg no more without.'

92. *St Denis*: That is, Dionysius the Areopagite (see introduction, pp. xvi–xvii). This is the author's only specific quotation from Pseudo-Dionysius outside the *Mystical Theology*; it is taken from *Divine Names*, as translated into Latin by Sarracenus, chapter 7 (*D. Dionysii Cartusiani Opera Omnia*, vol. 16, Tournai, 1902; or *Dionysiaca*, ed. P. Chevalier, Bruges, 1937).

93. *At one time… cleverness*: Medieval writers with any pretension to learning are indeed much given to quoting authorities. Authority was in general more highly valued than originality.

94. *He that… him hear*: Mark 11:15, and other places in the Gospels, in relation to the understanding of parables.

95. *ecstasy*: ME *rauisching*.

96. *Moses… the second*: See Exodus, chapter 24 onwards.

97. *For the grace… witnesses*: This interpretation is that of Richard of St Victor, *Benjamin Major*, IV:23–V:1.

98. *An instance… the valley*: Exodus 33:7–11.

99. *Do that… and when*: See the prologue.

100. *And if it… humble ability*: *Privy Counselling* is the fulfilment of this promise.

101. *St Gregory… holy desires*: Gregory, *Homilia in Evangelia* 2:25 (*Patrologia Latina* 76:1190): '… for holy desires grow by delay. If however they lessen by delay, they were not desires.'

102. *Concerning… holy desire*: Augustine, *Ten Homilies on the Epistle of St John* IV:6, in *Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. VII (New York, 1888), p. 484: 'The whole life of a good Christian is an holy desire'.

103. *God's blessing and mine*: This form of valediction was used in the Middle Ages only from parent to child, here from spiritual father to spiritual son.

The Book of Privy Counselling

1. I retain the medieval title by which this work is generally known. 'Privy counselling' means private or personal advice.

2. *antiphon*: Passage sung by one choir in response to another.

3. *Let that… foundation*: That is, the belief that God is as he is.

4. *The fact that I exist*: The ME *That at I am* is more often interpreted as meaning 'That which I am', but it seems clear from what follows that the author is discussing the contemplative's thought and feeling of the mere fact of his existence, rather than the specific nature of his existence.

5. *So they say… understand it less*: This long and intricate sentence seems to betray the writer's anger at responses to his earlier writing, presumably the *Cloud* itself.

6. *If I touch… healed*: Matthew 9:21: 'If I shall touch only his garment, I shall be healed.' The woman had been 'troubled with an issue of blood twelve years', and when she touched Jesus's garment he told her 'thy faith hath made thee whole' (Matthew 9:20–22). For the hem, see Matthew 14:36.

7. *Honour the Lord… with wine*: Proverbs 3:9–10; but the standard text of the Vulgate speaks of giving the fruits not to the poor but to the Lord. Proverbs is one of the 'wisdom books' traditionally attributed to Solomon. The following pages of *Privy Counselling* consist of an elaborate allegorical interpretation of these verses from Proverbs (probably original with the *Cloud* author), setting aside their material sense in favour of a spiritual understanding.

8. *substance*: The author is punning on two senses of this word. In the text from Proverbs it means 'possessions', but he interprets it here as 'individual being'. See *Cloud*, n. 78.

9. *undivided*: ME *not in specyal*, in Christ's case, this implies without separation of his Humanity from his Godhead.

10. *No man… in nature*: The author is applying to the contemplative Jesus's words in John 15:13: 'Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends.'

11. *For the latter… greatest perfection*: The implication is that contemplation is of higher value than the corporal works of mercy

(which include feeding the hungry), good though the latter are in themselves.

12. *Beatus homo… ne capiaris*: Proverbs 3:13–14 and 21–26. The Douai translation of the standard Vulgate text reads: 'Blessed is the man that findeth wisdom, and is rich in prudence. The purchasing thereof is better than the merchandise of silver: and her fruit than the chiefest and purest gold… My son, let not these things depart from your eyes: keep the law and counsel: and there shall be life to thy soul, and grace to thy mouth. Then shalt thou walk confidently in thy way: and thy foot shall not stumble. If thou sleep, thou shalt not fear: thou shalt rest, and thy sleep shall be sweet. Be not afraid of sudden fear, nor of the power of the wicked falling upon thee. For the Lord will be at thy side, and will keep thy foot that thou be not taken.' The Latin version of verse 14 quoted by the author is slightly different, and would be translated: 'The purchasing thereof is better than the merchandise of gold and silver: her fruits [are] the first and purest'. As with his earlier quotation from Proverbs 3, the author proceeds to interpret the verses in a strictly spiritual sense.

13. *morally*: That is, according to the moral or tropological level of interpretation, which related the text of the Bible to the human soul and its virtues.

14. *belched up*: See Psalm 44:1: 'My heart hath uttered [*eructavit*] a good word'. This undignified term was commonly used to refer to the soul's spontaneous expression of praise or wisdom.

15. *Love is the fulfilling of the law*: Romans 13:10.

16. *In hiis enim… et proximi*: Matthew 22:40: 'On these two commandments dependeth the whole law and the prophets', which the author quotes in Latin, adding a gloss, 'namely, love of God and your neighbour', derived from Jesus's words in the preceding verses of Matthew (22:37–39).

17. *For, as Solomon… diabolic delusion*: The world, the flesh and the Devil are traditionally defined as the 'three temptations'.

18. *Vniverse carni sanitas est*: Proverbs 4:22: 'they [Solomon's words] are… health to all flesh'.

19. *See, friend… self-preservation*: Power, wisdom and goodness (or love) are associated respectively with the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

20. *How often… Rachel died?*: See Genesis 35:16–19. The allegorical interpretation that follows is most closely paralleled in Richard of St Victor's *Benjamin Minor*, chapter 74 (*Richard of St Victor: Selected Writings on Contemplation*, trans. Clare Kirchberger, London, 1957, p. 112) but similar readings had been proposed by earlier exegetes, including St Augustine and St Gregory.

21. *By Benjamin… in mentis excessu*: Psalm 67:28; 'the prophet' is David, supposed author of the Psalms. 'Ecstasy' translates Middle English *excesse*, from Latin *excessus*, a technical term in mystical writings for the state in which the contemplative is outside himself; 'rapt' translates ME *ravischid* (corresponding to Latin *raptus*), another technical term, meaning being swept away and dominated by a force outside oneself, often with traces of an erotic sense.

22. *wax tablets*: ME *tables*, used by students for note-taking at a time when permanent writing materials were too expensive.

23. *Perfect humility sets no limits*: St Bernard, *Liber de praecepto et dispensatione* 6:12 (*Patrologia Latina* 182: 868): 'For perfect obedience knows no law and is confined by no limits'.

24. *So I do… have it!*: The author is evidently alluding to the fact that he is the spiritual director of the book's recipient.

25. *This is… Testament*: See *Cloud*, chapters 3, 4 and 71.

26. *This is… ignorant knowledge*: See, for example, *Mystical Theology*, Prayer of St Denis, for 'bright darkness', and *Cloud*, chapter 71, for the treasure contained in the Ark.

27. *This makes your prayer very short*: See *Cloud*, chapter 37 and n. 64.

28. *Si quis… sequatur me*: Matthew 16:24: 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'.

29. *height of perfection*: See *Cloud*, chapter 44.

30. *intermediary*: See *Cloud*, chapter 34 and n. 61.

31. *for that… contempt for God*: See *Cloud*, chapter 44 and n. 70.

32. *the joys of our Lady*: One common scheme of medieval devotion was based on the joys of the Blessed Virgin, usually five in number – the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and her Assumption into heaven.

33. *Many people… are another*: This distinction may have needed making in an age when the heroic ethos, with its high valuation of outward actions and displays of prowess, was still predominant.

34. *Anyone who… be inside*: This may be intended to correct misunderstanding of the *Cloud*'s apparent disparagement of meditation on the Passion (in chapter 7).

35. *Ego sum… pascua inueniet*: John 10:9: 'I am the door. By me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved; and he shall go in and go out, and find pastures.'

36. *Qui vero… et latro*: John 10:1: 'He that entereth not by the door… but climbeth up another way, the same is a thief and a robber.'

37. *Sine me nichil potestis facere*: John 15:5: '… without me you can do nothing'.

38. *first mover*: Just as in medieval cosmology God as 'first mover' was understood to impart motion to the physical universe, so it is he who must set going the process by which a human being moves towards him in spirit.

39. *blind*: That is, imageless.

40. *your delight… child*: That is, the delight you feel in contemplation is as simple and spontaneous as that of playing with a child; cf. *Cloud*, chapter 46 and n.76. The rhyming couplet is in the original.

41. *pliant*: ME *pleying*, with a probable pun on 'playing'; *kid* (ME *roon*): soft skin, such as that produced by the leather-makers of Rouen.

42. *Expedit vobis ut ego vadam*: John 16:7: '… it is expedient to you that I go'.

43. *On this text… spiritual eyes*: 'Doctor' (Latin 'teacher') is the title given to the most important of the early fathers of the Church and

medieval scholastic thinkers. Here the author is probably referring to St Augustine, who wrote, commenting on John 16:7: 'unless he went from us in the body, we would always see his body in the flesh, and we would never believe spiritually' (*Sermo* 143:4; *Patrologia Latina* 38:786). Augustine's focus is on belief, however, while the *Cloud* author is concerned with love.

44. *man naturally desires to know*: This is the opening sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: 'All men by nature desire to know.'

45. *Sciencia inflat, karitas edificat*: I Corinthians 8:1: 'Knowledge puffeth up; but charity edifieth.'

An Epistle on Prayer

1. *And my advice… in your heart*: Fear was widely regarded as the beginning of the soul's journey to God.

2. *instant*: The ME text has *moment*, but the comparison with the twinkling of an eye suggests that 'instant' may be a more appropriate term (cf. *Cloud*, chapter 4 and n.14).

3. *Psallite sapienter*: Psalm 46:8: 'sing ye wisely'.

4. *The beginning… Lord God*: Psalm 110:10: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'.

5. *Such is… to reform*: It is not certain what text the author has in mind; one scribe indicates Psalm 36, the general theme of which is that 'God will not forsake his saints' (verse 28).

6. *for devotion… service of God*: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Maryland, 1981), vol. III, p. 1,529 (IIa–IIae, q. 82, art. 1): 'devotion is apparently nothing else but the will to give oneself readily to things concerning the service of God'.

7. *St Bernard… and gladly*: The precise source is uncertain, though the *Vitis Mystica*, chapter 19, falsely attributed to St Bernard, urges

the contemplative to rejoice in serving God (*Patrologia Latina* 184:674–5).

8. *green smell… taste of the tree*: Smell and taste are often not clearly distinguished in medieval writings. *Green* means 'unripe', but is retained here for its sensory concreteness.

9. *moment*: Like an instant (*Cloud*, n. 14), this was a term of scientific precision in the Middle Ages: it amounted to two or two-and-a-half minutes.

10. *This accords… with God*: I Corinthians 6:17: 'But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit'.

11. *marriage between God and the soul*: Another of the relatively few places where the *Cloud* author uses such imagery (cf. *Cloud* chapter 2, n. 8 and chapter 34, n. 60).

12. *Dilectus meus… to him*: Song of Songs 2:16. The sense is clearer in the Authorized Version: 'My beloved is mine, and I am his'.

13. *Skill is better than brute force*: For this proverb, cf. *Cloud*, chapter 46, n. 73.

14. *your angelic messenger*: 'Angel' comes from a Greek word meaning 'messenger'. The author seems here to accept the popular belief that a guardian angel was assigned to each human soul at the moment of its entry into a body. This was first given theological definition by Honorius of Autun in the twelfth century; it is not part of the teaching of Pseudo-Dionysius in his *Heavenly Hierarchies*.

15. *God's blessing and mine*: The same fatherly valediction occurs at the end of the *Cloud* (see *Cloud*, n. 103).

APPENDIX
Middle English text of *The Mystical Theology of St Denis*, chapter 2

II Capitulum: How we schul be onid to the Cause of al, beyng aboven al

In this sovereyn-schining derknes we prey to be done up, and, bi nought seeyng and unknowyng, for to see and for to knowe hym that is aboven al seing and al knowyng in this same not se and not knowe; and sovereyn-substancialy for to preise, bi doing awey of alle thees beyng thinges, hym that is sovereyn-substancial in himself. The maner of whiche doyng awey may be seen bi this ensaumple that foloweth.

Here is a man havyng a sounde stok of the grettest quantitee withoutyn hym, liing before hym, and havyng withinne hym entent and craft to make an ymage of the leest quantitee, of that place of the wode, the whiche is, bi mesuryng of right lynyng, in the sentre and the middes of that same stok. First thou wost wel by natureel wit that er he may com to for to see that ymage bi cleer bodely sight of his outward iye, or for to schewe it to be seen unto other, the whiche he hath in hymself by cleer crafte of ymaginacioun, the stok yit beyng hole on every side, he most algates by craft and by instrumentes voide awey alle the outward partyes of that wode, being aboute and lettyng the sight of that same ymage. Right so we must have us in this highe devyne werk, as it is possible to be comyn to in understondyng by soche a boistous ensaumple of so contrary a kynde.

For we moten be in this werk as it were men makyng an ymage of his nakyd, unmaad, and unbigonne kynde; the whiche, thof it be in itself and to itself evermore free – withinne alle creatures, not inclusid; withouten alle creatures, not schit oute; aboven alle creatures, not borne up; binethe alle creatures, not put doun; behynde alle creatures, not put bak; before alle creatures, not dreven forthe – nevertheles yit, to mans understondyng, the whiles it is knittyd to this corumpid bodi, he is nevermore cleerly schewid, bot as it were a thing that were coverhid and overlappid and overleide with unnoumerable sensible bodies and understondable substaunces, with many a merveilous fantastik ymage,conjelid as it were in a kumbros clog abouten hym, as the ymage of the ensaumple wretyn before is hid in the thik, greet, sounde stok. The whiche koumbrous clogge, thus conjelyd of thees unnoummerable diversitees, we moten algates craftely pare awey by sleight of grace in this devine werk, as stronge letters contrariing unto this clene hid sight. And thus bi this sleigh gracious doyng awey of hem alle we moten cleerliche preisyn, and aboven mynde, the self fairheed in the self nakid, unmaad, and unbigonne kynde; in a maner that is unknowen how unto alle, bot only to thoo that it proveth; and yit evermore to thoo same, bot onliche in tyme of the proef.

It behovith us alle that ben practisers of this devinité for to make oure deniinges on the contrary maner to oure afferminges; for whi we settyng oure affermynges begynnen at the moost worthi thinges of thees beyng thinges, and so forthe by the menes we descende to the leest, bot in oure deniinges we begynnyn at the leest, and stien up to the moste, and eftsones by the menes, from the hiest to the last, and fro the last to the hiest agein, we foulden alle togeders and done hem awey, that we mowen cleerliche knowe that unknowyng, the whiche is wallid aboute from al knowable mightes in alle thees being thinges; and that we mowen see that sovereyn-substancyal derknes, priveliche hid fro al light in thees being thinges.